

The image features a central figure of a Space Marine in blue and gold armor, holding a large, complex weapon. The background is a fiery, orange and yellow glow. The text is overlaid on the image in a stylized, metallic font.

WARHAMMER
40,000

SPACE MARINE
HEROES

DEATH KNELL

PHIL KELLY

The image is the cover of a book titled "Warhammer 40,000 Space Marine Heroes: Death Knell" by Phil Kelly. The central focus is a detailed illustration of a Space Marine in blue and gold armor, holding a bolter. The background is a fiery, orange and yellow battlefield scene. The text is arranged in a hierarchy from top to bottom: "WARHAMMER 40,000" in a stylized font, "SPACE MARINE HEROES" in a clean sans-serif font, and "DEATH KNELL" in a large, bold, white font. The author's name "PHIL KELLY" is at the bottom in a smaller white font.

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About the Author

An Extract from 'Dark Imperium: Plague War'

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SPACE MARINE
HEROES

DEATH KNELL

PHIL KELLY



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

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

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

laughter of thirsting gods.

PART ONE

INSERTION

PROLOGUE

INTO THE INFERNO

ISLE OF ST CAPILENE BEATI SEDNA (SHRINE WORLD)

The cratered mud flats of the Capilene Coast rippled amber, gold and deep blood red. Shoregulls cawed in alarm, startled by the thump of distant explosions.

'Move, brothers! Move or we die! Regroup at—'

Brother-Captain Thassarius was hurled through the air by the force of a megatonne blast. The rock-hard ceramite of his battleplate was all that prevented him from being torn apart.

The Ultramarine landed with a splash in the black tidal mud, ears ringing and head pounding with pain. As he twisted to get up, he saw that his Land Raider transport had been reduced to a smoking wreck behind him, and that the bodies of three of his command squad were scattered around it, ripped flesh and gore-slicked bone poking out from the ravaged ceramite of their armour. They had not died well. It was said that little short of a direct hit from a godhammer-pattern lascannon could harm a Land Raider, but in the last ten minutes *Vengera* had taken such punishment it had literally come apart, and its passengers with it. The brother-captain got unsteadily to his feet. He felt almost as if he were underwater, his auto-senses recalibrating over and over but failing to clear. The maddening toll of the St Capilene bell was the first sound to break through the fug, each clang a spike of hateful sensation that pierced his hindbrain. He could barely hear his brothers splashing through the shallows around him, their

shouted battle-cant distorted by his sensory concussion.

Long-honed war instincts brought his thoughts into sharp focus. No time to attend the fallen; Apothecary Venas would look to that. He wiped the mud from his helm lenses. They were still smeared and grit-stained, the oily muck of the tidal flats hampering his vision. Fighting to clear his mind, he took off his helm and ran forward through the brownish-green sludge, scanning his surroundings for a new route of approach.

The assault was becoming a nightmare.

Jutting from the mud flats was their target, the Isle of St Capilene. It was a fortified mount of an island almost as tall as it was wide, with a skirt of fishing villages at its waist. A walled city ran around it in a loose spiral to reach a natural peak. It was crested by a high-walled basilicanum of stunning beauty, easily large enough to house a company of Space Marines and their armourium to boot.

And in a manner of speaking, it did.

A gargoyle-encrusted bell tower crested the basilicanum's ridged spineway. In form it was a square spiral with four open arches beneath its topmost spire. From within those arches came a maddening clangour; since Thassarius had taken off his helm, it had gone from an irritant to a mind-shaking din.

Thassarius forced himself to concentrate. There were thousands of lives at stake, and millions more if their heretical quarry escaped from the island. As a captain of the Ultramarines Chapter, he would die before he would let that happen.

'Get the vehicles north-west at double pace!' shouted Thassarius. He waved at the armoured column of cobalt-blue tanks, and they ground forward, changing heading as they accelerated.

The sides of the island were so steep, the structures built upon it so densely packed, that a vertical insertion by drop pod would have been risky in the extreme. It had been Thassarius' decision to lead an armoured spearhead from the Imperial mainland, trusting to speed and resilience to see them through. But the island's defences had proven far deadlier than they had imagined.

Macro-cannons, rolled out from hiding places in the caves on the shoulders of the peaks, boomed once more in the distance. A second later, three more tanks in the armoured column were torn apart. Crewed by the

heretics that had taken the island and changed it from a place of sanctity to a blasphemous stronghold, the guns were blasting out heavy ordnance with every passing moment.

Ruby beams of light seared from the Land Raiders still intact enough to return fire, punching through rock and earthen revetments to blast apart the artillery sprouting from the island's shoulders. It was not enough. The ordnance kept falling, each black blur hammering another transport into mangled scrap.

'Move left! Into the shadow!'

Thassarius waved again at his brothers, and the three tanks at the front of the spearhead growled forward into the long, wan shade of the basilicanum. Those at the fore of the column made it to the area Thassarius had designated as a safe zone. The arc of fire from the enemy guns could not reach them there, and those that survived could finish their approach intact.

The rearguard was not so lucky. More macro-calibre ordnance fell amongst them. Each thunderous detonation tore open a battle tank or personnel carrier, their wrecks coming to rest with a splashing skid.

It was then that the first three vehicles in the column began to tip forward, as if driving sharply downhill.

Thassarius felt the cold claw of despair upon him. Tidal quicksand. Its semi-fluid state was more lethal to an Imperial battle tank than any gun.

The tanks shifted into reverse gear, churning mud in great spraying fountains of black slop. Disturbed by the heavy tracks of the spearhead, the sucking mire gave way all the quicker, turning to thin slurry under the weight of those armoured vehicles that ground onward after the vanguard.

The Space Marines made haste to debark from the sides of each transport, splashing out in urgent realisation of their plight. Some were already sinking, struggling to free themselves from the cloying muck.

'Get on top of the vehicles!' shouted Thassarius. 'Use them to get back to the *Calth*.'

As the tanks slowly sank, the debarking Ultramarines clambered atop their roofs, leaping from one to the other to land with ringing metallic clangs. One reached the Land Raider *Echo of Calth*, then another. When Thassarius rejoined them a combat squad was sheltering behind the metal behemoth, regrouping for an assault on foot as machine-fed firepower

pinged from the other side of the Land Raider.

Ahead and to the left, some of the beleaguered tanks trapped in the quicksand had sunk down until mud covered the proud iconography on their flanks. Others had sunk to their vision slits, and some even further, only their pintle-mounted weaponry jutting from the muck.

Those Space Marines who had been at the forefront of the column fought through the quicksand as best they could, spreading their arms as they swam through the quagmire to push themselves forward. As Thassarius watched, they too were claimed, inch by agonising inch. Here, in this Emperor-forsaken place, it seemed even the landscape was so tainted it was trying to destroy them.

The captain knew his brothers would not suffocate under the sands - Adeptus Astartes battleplate was designed to be operative even in the black void of space - but if they were lost and out of vox contact, they were doomed to a lingering death. Their precious gene-seed would be denied to the Apothecarium, and the Chapter lessened for it. It was a horrible fate.

'Throne of the Emperor,' Thassarius swore under his breath as he waded forward. 'This is a disaster.'

'I concur,' came the respirator-muffled tones of Brother Promethor from behind him.

The captain turned to see the veteran warrior stroking the barrel of his plasma gun as if to pacify a wounded animal.

'We will never reach the basilicanum like this,' he said. 'Pity.'

Thassarius grimaced in irritation. 'We will run there if we have to.'

'The Crimson Slaughter have their reputation for a reason,' said Toriad, Squad Thassarius' weapons specialist. He was lugging his heavy bolter, a gun almost as large as he was, with grim determination. 'Whether it be to artillery strike or this damned quicksand, we'll have lost two-thirds of our number by the time we reach the shore.'

'Are you two trying to test my patience?' said Thassarius. 'We are Ultramarines. The primarch's blood runs hot within our veins. We *cannot* fail. If we mount an offensive, take out those cannons, we can gift the next assault a chance.'

'Of course, brother-captain,' said Toriad, chastened. 'We are with you.'

Thassarius pushed forward, his steps becoming a loping run as he found

the firmer ground that girdled the isle itself. 'Enough talk. With me!'

The brother-captain heard Promethor and Toriad splashing close behind, their steps throwing haloes of brackish water. The rich cobalt of their heraldry was swiftly becoming obscured by sickly brown muck. It smelt of tar and rotting fish, the stench clogging Thassarius' nostrils so thickly he could taste it.

Promethor cradled his gun to him, trying his best to stop the mud from fouling his weapon, but it was futile. They would soon be slicked head to toe. Thassarius could feel the plasma gunner's eyes on him, a vague sense of accusation nagging at the back of his mind.

'Not far now,' shouted Thassarius as he waved onwards the scattered handfuls of his fellow Space Marines pounding through the mire to his left and right. 'Besides, the artillerists are a lot less likely to notice us, clad in this mud, than a tank in the full heraldry of Ultramar.'

'The Imperial Fists have it right,' growled Toriad, his teeth gritted with the exertion of lugging his heavy bolter at a loping run. 'Camouflage is the colour of cowardice.'

'You wish to stop and cleanse your battleplate, brother?' asked Promethor.

'Save your breath for the battle,' said Thassarius. 'When we make it to the island, we'll need every ounce of strength we have. Forward, for Macragge!' The brother-captain heard the whistle of incoming ordnance behind him, bracing himself as a shock wave hurled him forward. He kept his footing, his stagger turning into a run once more. There was another thunderous boom as the next volley of shells struck one of the Astra Militarum squadrons forming the rear of the armoured column.

The captain risked another glance backwards as he ran. He could only make out a scant handful of the Leman Russ battle tanks, their olive drab colouration standing out against the omnipresent brown of the mud flats. The rain of heavy shells blasted two of the tanks apart. Their hulls ruptured in blossoms of orange flame.

As Thassarius ran through a rippling pool of brine, he skimmed his helm in the water to wash off the mud before replacing it. A trickle of cold water ran down either side of his neck before the helm's interface sealed. Almost instantly a tactical display sprung into being; he was relieved to find his auto-senses synching without a glitch. In moments he had a visual on near every aspect of the battle around him.

'Air cover. Abandon control net and close on this position. We need these artillery nests brought down as an urgent priority.'

'Acknowledged, captain.'

Within a matter of seconds, a Stormraven gunship flanked by a pair of smaller Stormtalons veered through the clouds gathering overhead. Silhouetted against the pink light of dawn the aircraft was much like a flying fist of metal; its heavy turbines left thick contrails in the air, scarring the smoke-churned skies. Thassarius nodded in approval as the aircraft launched a volley of hellstrike missiles at the jutting barrels of the guns in the mountain's flank. Lethal black cylinders left parallel white streaks in perfect synchronicity.

Two of the missiles struck home, tumbling rubble and unseating one of the giant cannons. It toppled slowly and fell end over end down the cliff face below. The other missiles detonated prematurely in a storm of flame.

'Fire and damnation,' swore Thassarius. Likely the missiles had been met by small arms fire from the Crimson Slaughter, a hail of self-propelled bolts sent on a collision course.

Then the anti-aircraft emplacements in the mountainside spoke in return. Their chattering roar struck a chord in Thassarius' warlike soul. Shells stitched across the skies, high calibre and relentless. They burst as flak upon the Stormraven and its escort.

One of the smaller craft was struck hard and went down in a spiral, trailing flame. The other two craft peeled away around the top of the peak, seeking to put themselves out of reach of the flak emplacements. On the other side of the mountain they were met by even thicker fire. Thassarius could only watch in seething bitterness as the aircraft were shot down, their support runes flaring red on his helm display before winking out altogether.

They would be avenged, thought Thassarius. He would ensure it.

The boat-ramps of the fishing village ahead were close now, and Thassarius, Promethor and Toriad redoubled their pace as the ground became firm. Sliding on shingles and crunching tiny shells underfoot, they darted up the concrete slipway until they reached the rock of the island itself. The brother-captain frowned as he made out the robed bodies of deceased Imperial priests dotting the rooftops. They were hung by the neck from high awnings, impaled on ornamental spires or nailed through

the chest to the cliffs above with pesciners' harpoons. Each corpse had a twisted circlet of metal nailed to its scalp and clotted blood running from its ears; here and there a shoregull pecked a rotting eyeball from its socket.

'Quite a statement,' said Toriad.

'The perpetrators will pay dearly,' muttered Thassarius to his fellows. 'And soon.'

Behind him, the dispersed remains of their strike force were making the last leg of the journey, clambering over walls and vaulting atop moored boats to spring up to the ramparts beyond. Perhaps fifty of them had made it in safety, all told.

More than enough for a credible assault, thought Thassarius. Fifty of the Emperor's finest could conquer an entire nation.

A niggling voice in the back of his head reminded him that more than twice that number of heretic Space Marines defended this island, and the defenders knew the terrain far better than he did.

'Regroup en route,' commanded Thassarius over the company-level vox. 'Abandon dispersal protocol. Form combat squads as best you can, and converge at the specified coordinates as planned.' Confirmations crackled over the vox, with runes of affirmation flashing in the brother-captain's helm display.

Thassarius led the charge up the cobblestone streets, his twin hearts pounding. He ran like a charging bull up the road that wound around the midsection of the island. Most of the windows and doorways were empty and black as coal cellars, but a few pale faces haunted the gloom. Some stared in disbelief - he caught expressions of angst, confusion, even hope - whilst others bolted for safety as the brother-captain and his warriors thundered up the street.

Thassarius cast only the briefest of glances, looking for signs of ambush. Over his three hundred years of active service he had learned that those who had seen the face of the Imperium's greatest enemy would be riddled with mortal frailties and crippling fears. No time for such weaknesses in a warzone, thought Thassarius; they would be hindrances, time sinks and liabilities all. He could serve them best by reaching the traitorous Chaos-worshippers that had claimed this island as their own, slaughtering them as swiftly as possible and scouring their taint from the populace.

Only then would the indomitable law of the Imperium reassert itself, and the planetary governor that ruled the mainland bring this site of blasphemy back into the fold.

The brother-captain ran further up the peak, Toriad and Promethor flanking him on either side with their weapons raised. As he took a set of ancient stone stairs four at a time, he scanned the landscape ahead and caught sight of a flash of crimson on the other side of a high parapet.

'Heretics sighted!' he shouted, drawing his power sword and depressing the activation rune. Its disruption field crackled to life. 'Ready yourselves for battle, my brothers. This day we kill them all!'

Thassarius saw movement above once more, and raised the fat barrel of his plasma pistol to the battlements. 'Burn!' he shouted, his mind aflame with hatred. The incandescent sphere that shot out blasted through a mess of brick and old plaster to slam into the renegade Space Marine behind, turning him into a blazing torch of white fire.

The captain motioned forward. He and his companions sprinted up through a maze of stairs and alleys, always seeking to go higher. Thassarius could hear something odd on the edge of hearing, the chanting of some dark ceremony accompanied by dull chiming. For a moment, he was reminded of the tolling of the unnatural bell and thanked the rprimarch it was silent for now. He headed up a steep cobbled road towards the chanting, pistol gripped tight and blade-arm tensed to swing at the slightest sign of crimson ceramite.

From behind a wall to the west came the unmistakable crack-boom of bolter fire. A heartbeat later, it was joined by war cries, dull explosions and the roars of dying Space Marines. His teeth clenched hard, emotions raging at the sound of his brothers in pain.

'This way,' called out the captain, breaking left. Putting his full weight forward, he shouldered his way through the crude and whitewashed wall that barred his path, emerging in a spray of dry plaster. Promethor kicked out the rest of it to let Toriad lug his heavy bolter through. The noise of battle got louder as the three of them ran down the alley behind the wall.

The thoroughfare was mildewed and overgrown, lined with cracked frescoes depicting the ascension of the Emperor to his Golden Throne. The image was a stylised coronation rendered in white marble and gold leaf - the Emperor looked every inch a god, rather than the crippled shell he

truly was, but then few mortals really knew what lay at the heart of Terra.

As he pounded down the alley, Thassarius passed a second, then third iteration of the image. The last scene was smeared with filth, the words 'Death to the Corpse-Emperor' scrawled in blood over its defaced image.

Cold rain began to patter down as the three Ultramarines emerged from the alley into a wide crossroads. To the north, the main street was a steep stairway that cut across the concentric streets and alleys ringing the peak. At its top was a levelled-out courtyard, and then a high cliff.

Thassarius ran hard up the stairs. He could see the deep blue of his Chapter and a few flashes of gunfire reflected from the white plaster walls. The runes of his helm display revealed that Squad Dalatrus had got ahead of them and launched an impromptu strike against the heretics. He heard a bellow of pain cut through the drizzle.

Promethor was already running straight up the street towards the site of the battle, plasma gun held at his shoulder. Thassarius ran as hard as he could to overtake him, scanning the area for the telltale red armour of his quarry. He would take the first bullets, then make the first kill.

The captain neared the top of the stairs. In the plaza ahead, a giant in baroque crimson armour was hacking into a knot of Space Marines. Two curving horns jutted from his helmet, ridged and sharp like those of a Tybetain bull grox. He stood tall and proud as he fought, as if he knew not the shame of his fall to damnation. His ornate broadblade moved with unnatural speed, leaving trails of red light in the air.

'More meat for the feast!' roared the traitor as he caught sight of Thassarius. He did not dignify it with a response; in truth, he was too taken aback.

This was no normal conflict.

Close by was a squad of mutant Space Marines engaged in pitched battle with the Ultramarines in the heart of the courtyard. The air was filled with unearthly screams. Spectral blurs whipped through the air wherever the renegades struck, reedy laughter cackling on the edge of hearing.

The Ultramarines, fighting back with bolter and powered gladius, were moving to surround the horned tyrant, those in front avoiding that deadly red blade as those to the flank hammered bolts into the Chaos lord's chest, back and abdomen. Thassarius saw flashes of light flaring where the traitor's force field protected him; likely he had some corrupt version of

the iron halo that was each brother-captain's due.

Keeping low, Thassarius waved his men to take position so all three could strike as one. Then he clenched his fist.

'Staggered fire!'

With a roar, Toriad leapt onto a tumbled wall, hauling his heavy bolter up with him to stamp into a raised firing position. The brutish weapon gave voice to its raw, chugging boom. Bolt shells as thick as a man's wrist hurtled towards the heretic with the flashing red blade, but a shimmering disc of energy dissipated their explosions. Promethor let fly a half-second later. The plasma gun's blindingly intense payload was enough to overload the heretic's force field with the sheer intensity of its energies.

Burning from head to toe, the horned war leader staggered backwards, then went down on one knee.

'Lord Thursk!' shouted one of his fellow heretics, running to his master's aid. Toriad panned his heavy bolter across on full yield, slamming three explosive bolts into the newcomer and tearing him apart mid-run.

Only then did Thassarius take his own shot. The searing ball of plasma that shot from his pistol slammed into the Chaos warlord's side, and he sprawled, the ceramite of his flank molten amongst an explosion of smoke and gobbets of metal. The heretic lord gave vent to a scream, but it turned into mocking laughter.

The brother-captain sprinted forward, feeling his lungs and hearts pumping in his chest as he closed in. Around him, ravaged bodies of crimson and blue were toppling, one after another, as the enmity of centuries was made manifest in acts of bone-shattering violence. Thassarius darted out of every blade's reach, every gun's crosshairs, intent only on the kill that would change the face of the battle.

He glimpsed something huge coming around the corner on the opposite side of the plaza.

'Watch your flank!'

The creature that smashed through the corner wall into the courtyard was a nightmare wrought in jagged metal. An engine of destruction some thirty feet tall, it had too many piston-driven limbs to count. A profusion of weapon barrels clustered around its ornately wrought torso. Hydraulic claws, each large enough to peel open a battle tank, snatched at the Ultramarines reeling from its gunfire; bursts of flame and chugging bolter

rounds staggered its prey for a few critical moments as it closed in.

Those Space Marines the creature caught were scissored in two, one after another. Others evaded it, firing bolt shells to blast flinders of metal from its hide. The metallic beast did not slow, as impervious as the cliff face at its back.

'Aim for its joints!'

Thassarius loosed a blast from his plasma pistol as he ran towards the thing with his sword raised. The sizzling round hit the creature in the knee. Its torso unit spun around, a screech of indignation coming from the stylised brass mask that passed for its head. The infernal creature stamped backwards, the autocannon on its torso thudding bolts into Thassarius' chest. It felt like he was being worked over by a team of sledgehammer-armed servitors, even though his iron halo's force field generator robbed them of much of their force.

Moving fast to the left, Thassarius made out the horned leader of the Chaos invasion as he darted behind his monstrous pet. The traitor saw him in return, sketched a mocking Macraggian salute with his glowing, howling daemon-blade, and then disappeared from sight entirely. The Chaos lord's giant beast withdrew, scuttling like some vast mechanical crab back into the Broadway beyond.

Thassarius heard the tight, distinctive explosions of Krak grenades from somewhere on the cliff top above him. There was a rumble, deep and seismic.

He felt a moment of confusion. He had tasked his forward elements with demolition where necessary, but none of his battle-brothers had climbed that high, not yet.

The brother-captain looked up in time to see the cliff face above the plaza crumbling away. Rocks toppled down in such measure they blotted out the wan light of Beati Sedna's sun. The avalanche sloughed into the street, and thousands of tonnes of rock consigned Thassarius, Toriad and Promethor to a crushing, grinding death.

CHAPTER ONE

AMIDST THE SHARKS

CAPILENE COAST
SIXTEEN HOURS LATER

The Chimera personnel carrier *Gravedigger* pushed through briny water along the seabed towards the Isle of St Capilene. Fully submerged, its pace was little faster than a man at a brisk walk.

Gunner Second Class Mawli Dostoyev peered out of the vision slit into the murky water. The window's nictating sub-aqua membrane was fogging the view even more than usual, but it was better than nothing, and at least made him feel like he was doing something useful.

Around the transport, eddies stirred. Underwater tides pulled at the tank's turret, eliciting faint groans. Dostoyev could just make out pincer-clawed gnarlbacks moving in slow motion from the tank's path as it made steady progress through the greenish murk.

'Are we under, gunner?'

'Affirmative; sir,' said Dostoyev. 'I mean, yes, Sergeant Sevastus. I meant to say, brother-sergeant. Sorry.'

The hulking Space Marine simply nodded as if deep in thought, running his gauntleted fingers through his white beard and over his lips.

Inwardly, Dostoyev cursed himself. Ever since the Space Marines had commandeered *Gravedigger* - and a select few of the 132nd Truskan Snowhounds with it - he had been reduced to babbling like a fool by the slightest interaction.

They were just so *real*. Not the idealised pics in the dispatches, nor the

propaganda images of the old Truskan woodcuts, but actual, living Space Marines. They were each between seven and eight feet tall, likely three times his own muscle mass even before they donned their heraldic battleplate. Emperor alone knew how much they weighed when girded for war. Ever since he had seen one up close, Dostoyev had felt an irrational fear that one might topple over on him and crush him to death.

But there was no getting around the fact that the Chimera, far more spacious than his beloved Leman Russ *Dogged Pursuit*, was the only type of tank in the regiment capable of carrying a squad of the fabled Adeptus Astartes. And even then, only just.

Being entrusted with ferrying them to an active warzone was an honour and a terrible burden all at once. They were heading straight back to the same island that had seen Dostoyev's battalion reduced to mangled scrap and a scattering of torn-open corpses left to rot in the mud, and it made his stomach clench with fear whenever he dwelt on it.

It had been Brother-Sergeant Sevastus' idea to use the Chimera's amphibious capabilities to make the journey to St Capilene at high tide along the seabed. So far, it was working. The Ultramarines were famed across the Imperium for their tactical nous, and though Dostoyev had seen the disaster of the initial assault first hand, they had since proved that reputation well earned. Thus far they had made from the mainland muster zone, to the coastal paths, to the causeway that led out into the sea, without incident. They were approaching the island without so much as a single bullet sent their way.

Far more than could be said for the previous invasion attempt. They still had not heard back from Captain Thassarius and his teams.

'Zettran,' whispered Dostoyev to his spotter and vox-operator. 'Any luck with the comms?'

His comrade snorted in derision, an ugly sound, before whispering back, 'You must be joking. Down here?'

'Only asking.'

'Not much point in trying, anyway. I overheard two of the Ultramarines saying the official line was that their advance party was lost in battle.'

Dostoyev had the feeling he was being watched. He looked back into the passenger hold.

Tell me what you saw—' said Sevastus quietly, his cold blue eyes locking

with Dostoyev's. 'As much detail as you can muster.'

'Well, not much more to tell, sergeant, brother-sergeant, sir,' blustered Dostoyev. 'We shelled the curtain walls as ordered, suppressing fire mostly, but stayed well back. It was your lot, sorry I mean your brotherhood, you Ultramarines that is, that made the approach. For a while it looked safe enough.'

'For a while,' said Aethor, his elbows on his knees and head low. The Space Marine was scraping his hypersteel combat knife across his bald scalp with a rasping sound that put Dostoyev's nerves on edge, examining the fine stubble he cut with each sweep before running it off on his armoured thigh.

'Guardsmen Zettran?' said Sevastus. 'Anything to add?'

'It all went to shards when they brought out the guns,' said Zettran from the driver's compartment. He scratched hard at his arm, a nervous tic Dostoyev had noticed his comrade had picked up since the battle. 'At least they drowned out the noise of that infernal bell. I was taking target data out of the cupola for most of it, and I could hear it loud as if I was right next to it, sometimes. They came over our earbeads somehow, even though they were nowhere near any of us, let alone our voxmen. I swear I can still hear their echoes, even now.'

'These guns,' said Brother Dolor, his stern features underlit by the green illumination of the auspex to which he was adding analytical data. 'Whereabouts on the island would you say they were stationed?'

'They were on the shoulders of the island, about two-thirds of the way up,' said Zettran. 'They were rolled from out of caves, looked like. Caves with archway entrances. You could see the plumes of smoke after each volley.'

'But this too was a trap,' said Sevastus.

'I suppose,' said Dostoyev, anxious to contribute. The idea that the Adeptus Astartes could ever fall for a trap made him highly uncomfortable. According to Commissar Yenst, scourge of the 132nd, the Space Marines were infallible. But he saw what he saw.

'They redeployed quick enough, to avoid the worst of it,' he continued. 'But when they moved into the lee of the peak, their tanks began to sink into the mud.'

The mood in the Chimera's cramped hold soured further, an awkward sense of failure heavy in the air.

'This we know,' said Dothran Garus, fingering the golden shell that hung at the end of his pistol. It was an honour trophy, if Dostoyev was any judge. He had a few himself, for he too was considered a marksman, even amongst the ranks of the Snowhounds. But next to an Ultramarine, he felt about as deadly as a rubber mallet.

Emanad Titus, the weather-beaten old warrior that had shaken Dostoyev's hand that morning as if they were somehow equals, broke the uncomfortable silence. 'How long until we reach the island?'

'Perhaps sixteen minutes,' said Dolor, consulting his auspex. 'Sixteen minutes and eighteen seconds, in fact. We are approaching via a most circuitous route.'

'Why?' asked Aethor. His knife scraped more invisible stubble from his skull, the rasping sound coming across as a threat. It made Dostoyev think of throats being slit in the gloom. 'Are we not concealed enough?'

'If we make a beeline for it, the ripples that form our wake will likely give any lookouts a clue to our intent,' said Vanial, tossing a frag grenade from hand to hand.

'Put that thing away, Vanial, you're making the Guardsmen nervous,' said Brother Titus. Dostoyev held up an open hand as if to imply that he saw Space Marine grenadiers every day, but he felt far from convincing, and Vanial chuckled at his discomfort.

'By approaching on a spiral course, and getting up close with the bluntnsharks, we keep hidden,' said Dolor.

'It feels too slow,' said Aethor. 'We are losing the initiative.'

'Are you scraping layers of brain from your skull with that knife?' asked Dolor. 'I see the sea-ganger in you is still alive and well. Always so eager to whet the blade.'

Aethor stared daggers back at his brother.

'Enough,' said Sevastus. 'We have tried the fire and fury of a frontal assault, Aethor, and it did not work. Now we try patience. Patience, resourcefulness and skill.'

'By keeping the element of surprise, we ensure the initiative is ours when the time comes to properly strike,' said Thaldus Castor, thumping a fist nearly as big as Dostoyev's head into his palm with a ringing clap. 'It is simple enough. I too want nothing more than to let my bolter even the score, to avenge the loss of our captain. But I learned a long time ago not

to let haste get in the way of duty.'

'Well put,' added Sevastus. 'We measure the blow, this time.'

'Guilliman said it best,' added Remus. '*Fight with the mind first and the blade second.*' I have no doubt he meant to include the missile launcher in that broad category.' He knocked on the silvered tube of his heavy weapon to awaken its machine-spirit. It was a ritual Dostoyev had seen Guardsmen gun-teams use for good luck in the Truskan snow trenches, but he had never expected it of a Space Marine.

'The primarch's Codex speaks through us all,' agreed Titus. 'Long may it be so.'

'He can tell us about it himself, if the news speaks true,' said Aethor with a wry grin. 'If he is truly resurrected, one day we might meet him in person.'

Several of the Ultramarines put their fists across their chests and bowed their heads.

'If we survive this assault, of course,' said Calistus. The flamer operative's voice was rendered into a disturbing growl by the protective respirator that hid the lower half of his face.

'Thank you, Adrenn,' said Sevastus dully. 'How like you to lighten the mood.'

'I will enlighten as many heretics as I can by way of recompense,' said Calistus, inclining his burn-scoured head by way of apology. 'A glorious pyre I shall make of them.'

Dostoyev winced. 'If you say so,' he muttered under his breath. Both the Guardsmen had found Calistus deeply unsettling ever since they had been introduced in the mission briefing. Admittedly, it was hard to find a flamer operative in the Astra Militarum who wasn't at least a bit unhinged. Yet Calistus' aura of otherness, combined with his sheer physical presence, was little short of terrifying.

'At least he isn't a plasma gunner,' whispered Zettran conspiratorially from the driver's seat.

'I can hear you quite clearly, Trooper Zettran,' said Calistus, tapping his ear. 'Auto-senses.'

Dostoyev could not suppress a glimmer of schadenfreude as Zettran hunched his shoulders, focusing hard on steering the Chimera on its winding course and pretending he had never spoken.

'Gunner Dostoyev,' said Sevastus, fixing him with a stern gaze. 'You watched the survivors of the bombardment make an attack on foot, correct?'

'I did indeed,' he replied, nodding. 'They filtered up through a pack of low buildings. We lost sight of them pretty quickly, but we did see flashes of gunfire about halfway up the island. Then a string of explosions on the shoulders of the peak. Small ones. The whole side of it slid down.'

'And?' asked Titus. 'Your tone indicates you have more to say.'

'I checked with squadron command afterwards. We hadn't fired a single shell at that location.'

'Another trap, then,' said Titus.

'I'm not sure how it all went so wrong so quickly,' said Dostoyev, his tone uneven and strained. 'We had the engineers thrice-bless each vehicle. Every crew had attended Preacher Farragoi's rites to the Emperor the night before. We made all the offerings to the God-Emperor we could.'

'For all the good they would do,' muttered Sevastus.

Dostoyev frowned in confusion. 'What do you mean?'

'Faith can be a powerful weapon, Sevastus,' said Calistus, the hint of a wry smile in his respirator-distorted voice. 'Haven't you ever seen a vid-thief sequence of the Adepta Sororitas in action? They are living miracles.'

'We cannot rely on such ephemeral concepts, if they even exist at all,' said Sevastus. He waved two fingers at his brother's burn-ravaged jaw. 'As well you know, Calistus.'

There was a thump on the outside of the hull, hard enough to rock the Chimera.

'Bluntshark,' said Dolor, holding up his auspex by way of clarification. 'Larger than average specimen.'

The thump came again.

Dostoyev felt his pulse begin to race. He had seen the carcass of one of the snub-nosed monstrosities on the beach of the mainland, and had not liked it one bit.

'They aren't supposed to be this far south,' he said. 'That's what the locals on the shore said, right, Zettran?'

'Likely drawn here by all the spilt blood,' said Sevastus. 'Our foes are called the Crimson Slaughter for a reason.'

'You might have a few teeth marks on the outside of this thing by the time

we reach dry land,' said Aethor, his grin like the flash of a blade in the gloom.

Dostoyev affected a shrug, but he could feel his throat begin to tighten, as if an invisible hand were around it.

Another thump.

Aethor sprang up and slammed the butt of his knife opposite where the noise had come from, filling the Chimera with a resounding metallic clang. Sergeant Sevastus shot him an admonishing look, and the warrior sat down, his eyes averted.

Barring the occasional creak and scrape along the base of the hull, there were no more noises from outside.

'Two minutes or so until debarkation,' said Zettran eventually. 'I reckon forty seconds until the top of the craft becomes visible.'

'Are we to the south of the outcroppings?'

'I followed the course that Sire Dolor gave me,' said Zettran. 'That's all.'

'So, yes, in answer to your question,' said Dolor. 'My scans were thorough.'

'I don't doubt it,' said Sevastus. 'Make ready, my brothers.'

Dostoyev watched, fascinated, as the sergeant checked the teeth of his chainsword one by one with his gnarled but muscular hands. He replaced his gauntlets, the seals re-clamping with a hissing whirr, then whispered a rite of appeasement to his ornate pistol. It was a manner of weapon that Dostoyev did not recognise, but could not muster the nerve to ask about.

The sergeant stood up, placing one hand on the roof of the Chimera to steady himself as it ground up a slight incline. 'This night we will see war once more,' he said, his tone low. 'We will feel the eyes of the Emperor upon us as we save this benighted island from itself, and shatter the stranglehold its malevolent conquerors have upon it.' His voice was building, getting more strident as he spoke. 'We will find those lost to us, and once we have scoured the renegade presence from this island, we will recover our brothers' remains so their bodies can be given the proper rites.' He was almost shouting now, his eyes alight. 'This we will do, no matter the cost. We will not fail the risen primarch! We will not see his trust misplaced!'

'Aye!' called out the ten Space Marines in the transport, their response loud enough to make Dostoyev's ears hurt. 'For Macragge!'

Zettran shook his head, shifting the gears of the Chimera as it climbed up an ever-sharper incline. 'Hard to think with all this infernal noise,' he said through gritted teeth.

'Just get us there, Zettran,' whispered Dostoyev, 'and we can sip recaff whilst the Angels of Death do the rest.'

'Oh no,' said Sevastus. 'You two are coming with us.'

Zettran paled. 'With respect, sir, we are tankers. Heavy armour at that. Not transport pool. Commissar Yenst would kill us if he knew we were driving this thing.'

'Besides,' said Dostoyev, 'if this is covert, won't a Chimera making its way over the island give your position away?'

'You are defenders of the Imperium first and foremost,' said Sevastus, his words as heavy as lead slabs. 'You have had eyes on the battlesite, which is more than most, and you may prove useful if we need to deal with any natives. Get ready. We go on foot.'

For the third time in as many hours, Dostoyev felt his heart sink into the add of his stomach. Though it was a flogging offence to admit it, there was something every regiment of the Astra Militarum knew about the superhuman warriors that represented humanity's only hope for survival in a hostile galaxy.

Fighting alongside the Adeptus Astartes was a death sentence.

CHAPTER TWO

THE TIP OF THE BLADE

OUTSKIRTS OF THE ISLE OF ST CAPILENE

Malacus Aethor paced through the fishing districts that formed the seaward ring of the island, his gait the measured stride of one who was quite used to taking point. His bolter and pistol were stowed; for all the glorious damage they could do, they were deafeningly loud, and Sevastus had asked for his squad to mask their presence as long as possible.

That was fine by Aethor. He had formed the tip of stealth missions on a dozen different raids as a youth, more to prove that he feared nothing than anything else. Here, the stakes were far higher.

Unlike the specialised squads of Primaris Space Marines that had taken the vanguard of the previous assault, he was part of a Tactical Marine squad, and had to be ready to fight in a score of different styles - usually employing several in the same warzone. If their attack failed, it would be mortal men and women that would pay the price alongside them, for the heretics had occupied an entire island full of Imperial citizens.

Strange, then, that the natives were nowhere to be seen.

Perhaps they had gone to ground, driven into seclusion by the bell that rang out every few hours from the basilicanum atop the peak. Aethor could not blame them. The raucous din assaulted concentration and put the mind on edge; it was always a blessed relief when the ringing stopped.

There was something wrong with the sound, that much Aethor could feel in his gut. Already he was tuning the bell out when it rang, and focusing the rest of his senses to compensate.

After ditching the Chimera in a sloping dry dock and covering it with fishing nets, Squad Sevastus had made their way into the first set of streets they could find. Cobbled and slick with rain, they ran between the ramshackle, terraced buildings of a village arranged in a massive concentric circle around the base of the island itself.

Flaking white plaster spattered the edges of the streets, and rivulets of water slid like tiny rivers down the irregular canals of the cobblestones. Every so often, Aethor caught movement in the corner of his eyes, but thus far, he had seen nothing larger than a rat-crab.

Any one of the doors and windows could have held a sniper, an assassin, a renegade with a bolter ready to take him down. Yet he would see them in good time, of that he was sure. Very little escaped the notice of a sea-ganger who grew up with nothing but a marlinspike to his name. It was his reaction speed, they said, that had kept him alive - that and his killer instinct. Though he would not easily admit it, they were his most prized attributes, the ones that had seen him win through the mercilessly stringent training regimes of the Chapter.

Decades ago, he had learned the ways of the Assault Marine alongside recruits trained by the finest swordsmen Macragge's nobility could offer. He had matched his short blade against their sabres, and he had triumphed more than once. He remembered Captain Thassarius raising an eyebrow when he had beaten Sergeant Sevastus' chainsword style with nothing but a combat blade, knocking the older warrior senseless with a sharp blow from the knife hilt to the temple. A peasant's weapon, Thassarius had called it; the comment still burned to this day.

Get inside the blade's reach, and the fight suddenly became very different. Ferocity, speed and quick thinking: these were the attributes that won fights at close range. That had proven just as true in the wars he had fought as an Ultramarine as it had when he had been a young assassin in the Talassarian sea gangs.

In a way, thought Aethor, that was exactly what they were doing now. Getting inside the reach of the enemy's guns, and closing in to stab at their heart.

The street was clear. Aethor darted into the lee of a tall, empty building, turned back, just for a moment, and held up a hand before motioning his fellows to come forward. Brother Dolor was at their fore, scanning his

auspex left and right.

Three minutes before, as they had moved into the village, Dolor had volunteered to shout a warning if he picked up any bio-readings or electro-gheist traces that betrayed an imminent attack. Aethor had declined through his teeth, and by the look in Dolor's eyes, the auspex specialist had read between the lines just fine. Here, silence was a weapon too.

Dolor had since given Aethor a good fifty-yard head start, and was sticking to the shadows. With the island's buildings canted heavily and those on the upper side of each road high enough they gave shelter to almost every inch of the cobbles below, even a hulking Space Marine could make himself unseen to the sentries above.

But to take point on a stealth mission, that required true talent.

Twice he had been offered the position of company champion, and twice he had turned it down. A long powered blade and a heavy shield would only slow him. More than that, the idea of wearing a cloak and a tall transverse crest was laughable to him. The less he wore on his head the better; he had believed that ever since he had lost a fight to a rival ganger who had grabbed his mohawk and yanked his head back, putting a knife to his throat a moment before Aether's fellow gangers caved in his assailant's head from behind.

Let the nobles and the pompous courtiers keep their elaborate wargear. He far preferred to wield the knife.

He *was* the knife. And here, he would cut away the infected tissue that was corrupting this place, kill by bloody kill, until all that was left was the Emperor's blessed purity.

There was a flicker of movement ahead, a rustle of cloth on the edge of hearing. Whatever had made it was too large to be a rat-crab.

Contact.

Aethor flattened himself against the nearest building, sliding into the darkness beyond with no more than a slight whirr of servomotors, from his modified battleplate. He saw mouldering bookcases, a double row of pesciners' tools held on a mag-strip and a heavy oaken door under a latticework of strings and pegs for the drying of fish. He would have to crouch to get inside, make himself small as best he could.

Something stirred gently in the breeze to his left; his head whipped around to see a rack of curing leathers. Clearly nothing was wasted in this

place, for alongside the tanned hides of goats and sheep, two of the tattered skins were human.

Aethor stepped carefully over broken crockery, placing his feet carefully, and took his knife to the screws on the hinges of the door, twisting them out one by one. Two of them were rusted in fast. He spat on them, the powerful acid produced by his Betcher's Gland eating away at the corrosion.

Wedging the tip of his boot under the door so it did not fall, Aethor rubbed the spit-burned screws with the tip of his finger until the shining metal beneath was exposed, then worked them free too. Slowly, with all the care of a museum curator moving a work of art, he took the door out in its entirety and propped it against the wall. Then he took a marlinspike from the rack of tools, cleaning it with the remainder of his acidic spit and straightening its handle ever so slightly so it was as close to perfectly balanced as he could make it.

He darted his head inside for a half of a second. There were a pair of sentries inside the room, staring out of the far window. They were seated on tall stools with their long-las rifles couched, hidden from the street by a ragged curtain. One of them had a profusion of strange growths, a little like a fleshy coral reef, protruding from his cheek and temple. The other one smelt powerfully of vinegar and rotting meat under the stench of old blood. They were both matted in dried gore, their clothes stained as if they had tried to bathe in it.

Mutants, then. Touched by the spoor of Chaos.

Aethor hated them on sight.

'The blue ones will be back, mark my words,' said the first, his tone low and slimy with phlegm. 'They got a bloody nose, but they won't give up that easily.'

'They're welcome to try,' said the other. He scratched like a dog at some hidden irritation under his rags. 'Lord Thursk is ready for 'em, and so am I.'

'Cobbles, Nerrek. You're just as frightened of 'em as I am. We're out of our depth, and you know it.'

'Not when the bell rings,' said the second.

Aethor leaned into the room, then threw the fisherspike with a sharp sideways motion. It sank right into the earhole of the first mutant, buried

up to the hilt.

'Wha—' started the sentry. His eyes unfocused, and he toppled from his stool.

Aethor was already next to the second mutant by the time the first one hit the ground. The grubby human thrashed with alarm as the Ultramarine's hard metal gauntlet covered his mouth. Then Aethor's knife carved halfway through his neck, cutting the windpipe through. Blood flew in spraying sheets across the curtain and flaking plaster of the room's windowsill as Aethor lowered him to the ground.

The Ultramarine pushed his hand out of the window and flicked two fingers forward, summoning Dolor from down the street.

'A little messy, and the aftermath is visible from the street,' said the auspex operative, one finger to his earbead. 'Could you not have snapped their necks, and spared all the blood?'

'Not if I wanted swift kills to ensure silence,' said Aethor.

'I suppose that's the main thing. Sevastus wants to know the precise nature of the bio-signs I detected.'

'Mutants. This place is already in thrall.'

'Not necessarily,' said Dolor. 'We think well before we act, and do not jump to conclusions, Theoretical before practical.'

'Of course,' said Aethor. 'I am no Blood Claw, brother. But look at them.'

The coral-faced mutant was unsettling enough, but now that they could see the second mutant properly, it was obvious he had a huge, suppurating wound in his chest and stomach. That wound had long teeth, and a slack, pustule-encrusted tongue that flopped from its red lair like a diseased eel. It tried to lick at Aethor's boot, and he stamped on it hard, squashing it in a burst of black fluid.

'Perhaps we are too late,' said Dolor. 'Perhaps the rest of them have taken refuge, or are being held hostage. That would seem to fit these renegades' modus operandi. They think like gangers.'

'That much is true,' said Aethor, smiling grimly. 'With luck, they may even present a challenge. Do you have an estimate as to their armed strength?'

'Very difficult to say, but given the disposition of the defences, the size of the island and the typical numbers of a renegade warband from modern Adeptus Astartes stock...' Dolor frowned. 'It is probable we face a

company of at least a hundred. Maybe two. And twice that if you count supporting elements.'

Aethor nodded, cleaning his knife. 'So we too are unlikely to survive.'

Dolor made a non-committal face. 'Sevastus has led us to victory against worse odds, with fewer men.'

'Those were orks, brother. Heretic Space Marines are a very different breed.'

'Even so.'

'Let us continue. Tell the others to stay back and give me a head start.'

'As you wish. I will report to the sergeant.'

Aethor set off, scanning every door and window as he went. He peered around a corner to see a crooked archway of buildings ahead, spilling over the road where the habs had piled one atop another. The street, trammelled and rutted by pesciner wagon wheels over the years, led underneath it. Those buildings at the top of the arch provided a great vantage point, the tallest strung with the half-eaten remains of a pesciner's corpse. Hanging around the cadaver's rat-gnawed neck was a plank of driftwood with the words 'All Must Follow' daubed in pitch upon it.

There were almost certainly more sentries stationed inside. Aethor did not need Dolor's auspex to back up his theory. Being downwind, he could already smell a whiff of their rancid sweat and the coppery undertone of dried blood. A tang of cordite formed high notes above the scent; one of their number had a solid shot weapon, and had discharged it recently.

Ahead was an alleyway leading up to another row of houses. Aethor climbed the nearest, moving up the outside wherever the brickwork afforded purchase. He selected his handholds carefully. One badly placed hand or foot and the entire edifice could come crumbling away.

Perching atop the load-bearing wall of the nearest building, Aethor moved along the outcropping of stone that abutted the archway. At times he spread his weight with a knee or a carefully placed gauntlet. At others he felt the timbers or piasterwork give underneath him, and had to quickly withdraw to find a new route.

The apex of the crooked bridge was not far now. Aethor paused for a moment; for him to plant his feet atop that building's roof was to risk the mutants inside hearing him. He scraped his blade laterally across his scalp to ensure his thoughts were sharp as his knife, and waited, entering a state

of mind that was somewhere between utmost balance and ferocious battle readiness.

Minutes slid by. Aethor kept still as a mantis watching its prey.

Another eighty seconds ticked past.

And there it was: the clangorous toll of the bell. The noise was uncannily loud, scattering Aethor's thoughts and ruining his composure with visions of unchecked bloodshed and strife. But it was regular, and sounded in groups of eight every time.

The second toll rang out.

Aethor placed one foot as the noise filled the air. As the third clanged loud, and the fourth, he moved carefully forward, using each booming clang to disguise the noise of his footfalls. Each step was aimed for the rebar-laced rockcrete lintels that held the roof tiles in place.

Perched on the roof's edge, Aethor looked down through a missing tile into the room below. He could make out five shadowy figures inside, each armed with a bayonet-fixed lasrifle. Two of them were peering through half-shuttered windows.

Three human adversaries he could have managed without too much fuss. Taking five down before one of them sounded the alarm was going to be almost impossible.

The sixth toll rang out.

Aethor called up Dothran Garus' rune on his helm display and eye-flicked a priority request for the marksman's attention. Wordlessly he did the same with Dolor, and sent a thought-impulse to link the two. It was the closest he could get to asking them for their help. There was one main reason he would choose Garus to aid him, one field in which he truly excelled - and another reason why he would bring in Dolor.

A second before the seventh toll of the bell, Aethor jumped. He came through the roof as the noise rang out, bursting down in a shattering storm of debris, ceramic tiles and dust, landing hard on one of the mutants below to soften the impact and stop him from taking out the floor below. His fist shot out, punching a second mutant in the side of the neck and sending him staggering away with a startled rasp of pain. By the time the third mark, a stub-horned grotesque, had raised his rifle, Aethor was already in close. He grabbed the barrel just behind the bayonet and pulled, headbutting the mutant so hard his horn-crowned head caved in with a dull crack. The

smell of blood and cerebral fluid flooded Aethor's nose. Using the rifle as a lever against the unconscious sentry's torso, he swung the mutant's dead weight into the fourth, bowling him over before stabbing his knife under his collarbone and up through his throat.

The fifth mutant, still some ten feet away at the other window, opened his scab-lipped maw to scream out a warning.

Then three things happened at once.

The eighth toll of the bell rang out, a hole appeared in the shutters, and the mutant's head exploded into a fine red mist.

Aethor nodded in curt acknowledgement of Garus' marksmanship and timing. He moved over to the only sentry still conscious, rolling around clutching his throat, and raised his foot. He stamped down hard on the mutant's solar plexus, shattering his breastbone and driving sharp pieces of his ribs into his heart.

That was when the floor gave way.

Both Space Marine and mutant corpse toppled into the building beneath. They bounced from a rebar lintel, ripped through a layer of wattle and daub, then dropped down into the sleeping quarters of the pesciners' communal hab on street level.

Dazed, Aethor struggled upright, dimly aware he had lost feeling in his right leg. He tossed aside the mutant corpse, then grimaced as six more burst into the room, their scaly and twisted faces contorted with rage.

One of them threw a knife at Aethor; he caught it as it flew past his head and threw it back. The blade stuck deep into the mutant's eye socket with a satisfying thunk. Aethor kicked one of the eight beds, slamming it into the shins of a mutant, toppling him.

Then the others were upon him, shouting in garbled patois as they grabbed his arms and tried to stab their marlinspikes into the joints of his armour.

'All must die!' shouted one of the mutants.

'Speak for yourself, heretic,' said Aethor. He flung himself sideways, tearing out of two of their grips and crushing one of the mutants against the wall with such force the foul thing immediately went limp. Aethor took a punch to the head, then kicked a fish-eyed assailant in the knee so hard his leg bent the wrong way with an awful snap.

Still there were more, jumping over the beds and jostling to grab at his

limbs with their brine-wrinkled hands. There was a sharp stab of pain as he felt one of their steel spikes catch in his throat, then a flash of agony as another sank through a joint of his armour into his armpit. A rusted sledgehammer came out of nowhere to catch him on the side of his head, and he went down, the readouts of his helm display fizzing with static.

The sledgehammer went up high, and Aethor caught a glimpse of the massive brute wielding it, his mad eyes staring from above a ragged bush of a beard. The Ultramarine tried to kick out, but one of his legs was pinned, and the other still all but useless after the fall.

A cobalt arm burst through the outer wall in a shower of white dust, grabbing the bearded brute around the throat and yanking him back so hard his head cracked against a stone shelf with enough force to put him out cold. Aethor glimpsed Dolor through the hole for a moment, and smiled. He used the brief reprieve well, slamming one of the beds upwards with his off hand to pin two of the heretics against one another in a confusion of limbs. He stood, leaning against the wire underside to hold them in place, and thrust his knife into the guts of another mutant so hard that he lifted the freak clean from his feet.

Two more brawny mutants stood in the far doorway, each holding a chunky-looking heavy stubber with ammo belts draped over their shoulders. One twitch of a trigger finger and their mission would be in tatters.

A black and silver chainsword appeared between the two heavies, slashing left and right. Though its throaty roar was absent and its chewing teeth unmoving in the name of stealth, it was still a dense slab of metal. It struck their temples with the force of an iron bar. The heretics staggered into the room, barely half-conscious.

Sevastus pushed in with them, the veteran sergeant's bald head fringed with dawn light like a halo. He struck again with his inert chainsword, the teeth ripping holes in the malformed gunners as he battered them over and over again. The larger of the two brought his gun round with a wail of desperation, but Sevastus caught it with his offhand, wrenching it from the mutant's grip and using it as a club to hammer the man to death.

Aethor took his knife to the two mutants he had trapped behind the mattress, methodically stabbing one and then the other in the side of the neck. He made sure the point slid up through their jaw, into their soft

palette and then into their brain. Letting the bed fall, he turned to Sevastus just as the old sergeant slammed the last traitor's head against the wall with force enough to crack the plaster.

'My thanks,' said Aethor, nodding towards Sevastus. 'That was too close.'

'Agreed,' said Sevastus grimly. 'We may have compromised the entire mission.'

'It was hardly Aethor's fault,' said Dolor as he came into the room, brushing the plaster dust from his arm. 'The structural integrity of these buildings is unpredictable.'

'Noted,' said Sevastus. 'We stick to the streets, then, from now on. This was not subtle.'

'The bell covered the worst of it,' said Aethor.

'There is that,' replied the sergeant. 'But we cannot afford any unpredictability if we're to make it to the basilicanum unmarked.'

'Noted,' said Aethor. 'My apologies. I will take more care to assess my environment next time. But here we are, and I do not hear any evidence we have lost our shroud of secrecy.'

'True,' said Sevastus, his sharp gaze reading the street. 'For now.'

CHAPTER THREE

LEGACY OF MACRAGGE

OUTSKIRTS OF THE ISLE OF ST CAPILENE

The young ones, they were always trouble.

Emanad Titus had served with the Ultramarines for two centuries, and was proud of it. Just as with all those who made it to tactical, he had trained as a heavy weapons trooper in a Devastator squad, a forward attack group in assault, and even as a Rhino driver for some time when things went south on Vigrid IX. He had stood his ground against charging greenskins, fought tooth and nail to rip apart tyranid-infected gene-cultists in a full-scale riot, and even outguessed a squad of eldar snipers in a three-day duel of wits. Those had been satisfying kills indeed.

Here, upon St Capilene, they faced the warriors of the Archenemy. They were arguably even more lethal than those of the xenos races, for they knew the mindset and tactics of the Imperials as well as they knew themselves. At least the rules were clear, when it came to the heretic and the traitor - kill, or be killed.

It was that which the Ordo Hereticus called the Enemy Within that disturbed Titus the most, where the lines blurred to grey, and no decision could truly be called righteous. Sometimes, when the lethal blade of a man like Malacus Aethor was involved, it could seem that they had an enemy right there in their own squad. How many innocents had died by his knife? Slash first, ask questions later, if at all. Even after all these years in the Adeptus Astartes, it did not sit well with him.

Titus' bionic eye whirred, feeding targeting data to the scope of his bolter

and back again. With it he could see through the gun sights of his trusted weapon with exceptional acuity. Sevastus had once said he prized Titus for his clarity of vision, and many of the squad had taken it literally. But the two old warriors shared a bond of brotherhood that stretched back for centuries, and Titus knew well what he meant.

As the most experienced battle-brother in the squad aside from the sergeant, the second unit of the squad was under his control. It was a testament to Sevastus that he could divide his team into two units at will and know they would function together as one, no matter how many times they had to adapt and change to the dictates of battle.

So close-knit were his battle-brothers they were communicating with little more than nods, glances and swift gestures of the fingers as they progressed up the incline of the streets. The two Imperial Guardsmen that had come with them were following suit as best they could; what they lacked in military discipline they at least made up for in their ability to blend into the surroundings better than the other members of the team.

Titus glanced back at them, picking their way through the streets with eyes wide. As he watched, the smaller of the two, Jandro Zettran, caught his foot in a mouldering net. The Guardsman's bulky vox-pack bore him over onto one knee, and he barked out a blasphemous oath, far too loud.

The old warrior grimaced. They were Cadian-trained, these Truskan Snowhounds, but they were still only human. There was a part of him that resented the fact he always ended up playing custodian whenever lesser warriors were directly involved, but the sad fact remained that he was good at it.

A few minutes ago, just before Aethor had jumped through the roof of the hab archway up ahead to make his vertical strike, the mind-shaking tintinnabulation of the basilicanum bell had rung out. He found himself disturbed by the sound, and on a hunch he had watched the Truskans out of the corner of his eye. Dostoyev grimaced and rubbed his temples with his palms, but Zettran had a far more severe reaction, spasming as if he were being electrocuted with each toll and beginning to scratch hard at his elbow joint. That was more than nervousness, though in the circumstances Titus had kept his thoughts to himself. He would watch them closely, lest they become more liability than useful ally.

The renegades of the Crimson Slaughter had yet to be seen, and here,

finding a way through the labyrinth of streets whilst remaining out of sight was more important than a strong concentration of force. At Sevastus' command the combat squads had advanced separately for now. Dolor's auspex work was invaluable, but no matter how skilled he was with it, it was standard pattern - unlike Titus' bionic eye, which was tight-beam only but could pick out a heat signature at six hundred paces.

There were three thermal blurs in one of the buildings up ahead, though Titus could not pinpoint which in the jumble of hab-spaces. Human life signs, by their intensity.

He motioned his squad forward, making the fist-then-fingers signal that denoted a wide spread in case of ambush. Calistus and Gaiun were at the fore, with Remus at the rear in case of heavy resistance. Even a heretic Space Marine in full battleplate could be blasted apart by a well-placed krak missile.

There was a muffled scream from the right, quickly dwindling to panicked sobs. Titus felt a jolt of adrenaline, already bursting forward at a run. Even a single such outburst could raise the alarm, leading to a counter-assault from scores of heretics. He shouldered through the hanging leather drape of a low hab-block door to find Brother Calistus looming over a trio of civilians.

A middle-aged man, fork-bearded in the style of the planet's islanders and running to fat, was standing protectively over a pair of young adults. His face was underlit by the pilot light of Calistus' flamer. A blend of anger and deathly fear twisted his features; he was close to lashing out with the evil-looking harpoon clutched before him.

The youngsters behind him had expressions frozen in ugly rictuses of fright. The elder of the two, a girl of no more than sixteen winters but with a head of lank grey hair, had her hand over the mouth of the freckled young man whose scream had drawn them inside.

Nowhere to run to, with the Space Marines blocking the doorway. Any moment now the father would attack. Calistus would almost certainly counter with lethal force, bowling him backwards with a jet of fire.

The incendiary deaths of three civilians were a finger's twitch away.

'Wait!' called out Titus, sliding his helm off and blink-setting his bionic eye to dormant. 'Do not act.'

'They show no obvious evidence of mutation,' said Calistus, his buzzing

voice rendered almost insectile by his respirator. 'But they do not answer my questions. If they cannot prove their innocence...'

'Stand down,' said Titus, waving Calistus back. 'You three. Are you native to this place?'

The man said nothing, but stared up in defiance, his arms shaking as he raised his whaling harpoon. It seemed a pathetic weapon next to a Space Marine's armoured might. Still, Titus knew better than to discount the determination of a parent defending its children.

'I said, are you natives to this place? You speak Low Gothic here, do you not?'

Still no answer.

'We cannot leave them,' said Calistus. 'They could well inform on us. It is unfortunate, brother, but we have no choice.'

'No,' said Titus. 'Absolutely not. There is something else at play here. Lower your flamer, please and step outside.'

Calistus hesitated, just for a moment, then lowered his weapon, ducked under the archway and stepped out. Titus slung his bolter and stepped out after him into the street. He motioned to the Astra Militarum troopers across the road. 'Gunner Dostoyev, come forward.'

'Er... right.' The dishevelled Truskan scanned his surroundings and ran across the cobbles, re-adjusting the clasp of the padded leather tanker's helm and straightening his flak armour. 'Right you are. Reporting for duty.'

Titus raised an eyebrow. 'They don't care how neat you look, Dostoyev. Just show them a human face. Three civilians, in a state of high agitation.'

'Not feeling so calm myself, right now.'

'I will follow,' said Titus. He gestured inside, and the tanksman - short enough to enter without ducking under the lintel - went through.

Titus crouched low and followed, his hands held out in a gesture of pacification. The bearded man, still on the brink of panicked assault, looked up in defiance and held his arm out protectively to shield his children. He had the calloused hands of a long-time rower, and tanned brown skin weathered from a lifetime plying the seas. A pesciner, then, without a doubt, and likely with a boat of his own.

'It's all right,' said Dostoyev in Low Gothic. 'We are the rescue party. Gunner Second Class Mawli Dostoyev, at your behest.'

'We are here to help,' said Titus, kneeling down. Even on his haunches he

was still almost as tall as the human male, but by making himself shorter and looking up at the pesciner he had changed the implicit threat in his hulking physique. An old tactic of Sevastus', kneeling to imply he was servant rather than master, but a good one. He turned his shoulder pad and tapped at the white 'U' shape of the Ultramarines symbol emblazoned there. 'We are not like these beasts in crimson armour. That I can promise you.'

The fork-bearded man scowled, then shook his head. 'Out,' he said.

'We should talk first,' said Dostoyev. 'You're not like them, are you? Like the tainted ones, the turncoats that serve the crimson giants?'

'I can't hear what you are saying,' said the pesciner. 'And I don't want to. Get out.'

Titus frowned. Keeping his hands out and open, he leaned to the left, just slightly, and peered at the side of the man's head. There was something in his ear - a thick plug of what looked like candle wax. The adolescent girl had the same ivory-white matter in her ears, but the son did not. 'We won't get through to him like this.'

'How so?' said Dostoyev.

'Just trust me,' said Titus. 'Get a piece of charcoal from the fire.'

'Right,' said Dostoyev, his tone uncertain. 'What did you—'

'Write the following upon the cleanest part of the wall in Low Gothic. *'We cover your escape. Jetty not far. Guns quiet for now.'*

To his credit, Dostoyev went over to the meagre fireplace without further question, making an apologetic face to the civilian family as he did so. As bidden, he scratched the words onto the mildewed plaster of the wall.

Titus watched the civilian as he read the words from the corner of his eye, unconsciously lowering the tip of his harpoon as the meaning sank in. The father stared at Titus for a long time. For a moment, it seemed as if he were looking into his soul.

'You,' the bearded man said to Dostoyev. 'Please watch that one for me. I do not trust him.' He pointed to Titus.

Then he turned around and rapidly signed to his children. He was flickering his hands in what Titus thought at first to be some pesciner's manual semaphore, perhaps for communication boat-to-boat during a tempest. It was too fast, too adroit to be from occasional use or recently learned in a state of crisis. When the boy signed back, his flashing palms

and fingers moving even more fluidly, everything clicked into place.

'Let's go,' said Titus, exaggerating each syllable. 'This island is about to burn.'

Titus felt a lingering melancholy as he watched the family hurry down the jetty from under the leaning wall of a tavern. Raised upon a high foundation of black brick in case of flood, the building's wooden sign - reading 'The Crooked Billet', and depicting a gnarled fisherstave - creaked occasionally in the wind. The thin sound played counterpoint to the distant cawing of shoregulls and the high *clank-clank-clank* of wire rigging slapping against metal masts.

If his life had taken a different path, thought Titus, he might have eaten simple fare in such a place, alongside simple, honest people. Maybe even got into his cups with them, or played a game of hexagrammon on the wharf. Yet the potential for that life had been taken from him when he was barely older than the pesciner's boy. He had become not a man, but a weapon.

The veteran's bionic eye was set on autoscan for movement across the harbour. Nothing thus far, thank the primarch. This was difficult enough as it was.

The two Imperial Guardsmen were still close at hand. The rest of his combat squad were keeping watch for enemy movement in the township above, observing from carefully selected nooks and alcoves in the street's architecture. Things had gone pretty smoothly, in the end; thus far they had not seen a soul. The desolation was eerie, but for now, Titus was fine with it.

Once the father had finally allowed himself to believe his family was being rescued rather than persecuted, they had moved fast towards the nearest boat. He untied it, coiled the rope and stowed it in a matter of scant seconds whilst his children climbed into the boat and hunkered down under a fishing net green with algae.

Titus found it hard to watch the father struggling to push the boat out through thick mud into the new tide, especially as he himself could have done it in a matter of moments.

But he stayed back, patient and watchful. To draw attention to this diminutive escape attempt was to doom the family to death from the

gunmen above, and likely jeopardise the entire operation in the process.

'What kept them from doing this days ago?' asked Zettran, scratching at his arm like a dog with a nasty rash. Dostoyev huffed, but did not reply.

'Fear,' said Titus. Zettran started, as if he had not expected the Space Marine to hear him, let alone reply. 'They were badly traumatised,' the Ultramarine continued. 'It is in the nature of a frightened animal to cleave to familiar surroundings, where it feels safe. Even if that means eventually being found by the very predator it seeks to avoid.'

The pesciner finally got the boat into the water, vaulting aboard in a twin arc of seawater before hunkering down. He slid the boat's oars into the runnels, dipped them into the water and began a strong, even stroke.

'That is all they are to you, then?' said Dostoyev. 'Frightened animals?'

Titus sent a mental impulse to his bionic eye, its lens extruding to zoom in on the civilians as they made their slow, quiet escape. The adolescent male was peering out from under the fisher's net. He saw Titus and Dostoyev watching him, and joined his hands in the sign of the aquila, thumbs linked and fingers fanned out like wings on either side.

'They are humans,' said Titus, 'and humans obey a set of natural instincts, no matter the situation. Understanding this is the key to saving civilian lives, should that be tenable within mission parameters. So says the Codex, and as ever, it speaks true.'

'The way you speak,' said Dostoyev, shaking his head. 'You are not human, then?'

Shoregulls cawed in the distance, the last rays of the sun rippling across the lapping waters of the new tide.

'No,' said Titus. 'No, I am not. I gave up my humanity a long time ago.'

'I don't believe you,' said Dostoyev, staring fiercely up at him. 'You are more like us than you realise.'

Emanad Titus looked down, turning to face the Imperial Guardsman fully. His bionic eye revolved with a soft whirr as it refocused. Other than that, he kept so still he may as well have been a statue, letting his forbidding appearance make all the statement it needed to.

Dostoyev looked away, and said nothing.

CHAPTER FOUR

UNDER THE SKIN

OUTSKIRTS OF THE ISLE OF ST CAPILENE

Keep taking risks, warriors of Ultramar. See what you reap.

Zettran blinked in surprise as the thought leapt into his mind. High up on the island's peak, the basilicanum's bell rang out again, loud and painful to hear.

The Guardsman shuddered and bit back a groan, casting a long glance at Dostoyev. His comrade took off his quilted tanker's helm, bashing the heel of his palm into his ear as if to dislodge some water before replacing his headgear and lying its flaps back under his chin. Other than that, his fellow Truskan seemed unmoved.

Zettran regretted leaving his own quilted helm back at the transport. He had taken it off during the initial assault to pick a piece of shrapnel from its exterior whilst the bell was ringing, and ever since then, it had felt uncomfortable and constricting. That was no reason to leave it behind in the Chimera, but leave it behind he had.

The sense of inferiority Zettran felt as he watched the Ultramarines file back through the harbour was intense, and growing more so. Whenever one of them spoke in their pompous, classical tones, his mind buzzed with barely suppressed anger. They were effortlessly powerful, more potent than he could ever be, and he hated it.

He scratched at the inside of his arm, cagily flexing it to test how badly it hurt, then bit his lip in pain.

There was a part of him that desperately wanted to be like them, but a far

deeper and more instinctual part of him saw the Ultramarines as sources of potential danger. He clenched his jaw as he saw the bald one with the darker skin leading Dostoyev in his wake like a dog after its master.

Titus, that one was called. Busy acting as if he was the squad's sarge, though he didn't have the rank insignia or the red helm to go with it. Dostoyev was just lapping it up. In contrast, Zettran had been all but ignored. It was as if the fake sergeant had somehow weighed him up and already found him wanting.

Up at the peak, the bell rang again.

Red helms for the sergeants, thought Zettran. Bloody stupid tradition. Sniper bait, is what it is. He deserves what's coming to him.

Facing an enemy as canny as these renegades, a sergeant wearing his colours so openly would be first to get killed as soon as he put his helm back on. Part of Zettran dwelled on the idea of being the one to pull the trigger.

Why not? Why not kill him?

The thought came unbidden with the next tolling of the bell. The clangour was somehow more like the scream of a tortured soul than the reverberation of simple metal. Yesterday, the sound had hurt his ears, rattled his brain as he had ridden half out of the cupola of *Pursuit* whilst Dostoyev stayed safe and dry inside. Today, they seemed to speak to him.

Why not wait until the bullets fly, then put a las-round in the back of the fool's head?

Zettran found himself nodding his head side to side, as if weighing up pros and cons.

Another clang from on high.

Easy, it'll be. Just make it happen.

No, thought Zettran. He was no traitor. There was no way he would attack one of his own, no matter how annoying he found them.

The bell rung out again.

Unless you could be certain no one would find out.

Zettran dismissed the thought. The itch on the inside of his elbow was getting worse, so much so it was hard to ignore.

'Gotta make yellow snow,' he hissed at Dostoyev. The stocky tanker turned and pulled an exasperated face.

'Really? What are this lot gonna think?'

'I covered you back at the harbour!'

'Fine. Just make it quick. I'll only tell Titus if I have to.'

Zettran nipped into the shadow of a crooked doorway, unzipped, and relieved himself. He pulled up his sleeve with his teeth as he did so, hissing as the cool air bathed the irritated skin of his forearm where the shrapnel of yesterday's battle had sunk in deep. Then he saw something out of the corner of his eye that made a cold sweat break out on his forehead.

The rash on his arm had puckered into a mass of ridges, fleshy and raw. In the crook of his elbow, it had formed something that looked like a badly healed wound. He made himself decent with one hand and pulled the sleeve back down with the other, trying his best not to swear in fear and revulsion.

The bell tolled once more, in his mind this time. The realisation hit him. He was becoming one of them, and there was no denying it. The proof was right there before him.

His wound had two rows of yellow, discoloured teeth.

The Ultramarines paced up the slick incline of a dry dock, too intent on their rendezvous to pay Zettran much attention. He watched as Titus talked with the real sergeant, likely unhappy that he had to cede control. They were making decent progress through the winding streets; the rooftops of the pesciners' village were far below them, now.

'Dostoyev,' Zettran said.

'What is it now?'

'I should vox back to control,' he said. 'Let them know we have met native resistance, but no renegades as yet.'

'You really want to break off from the others? Are you some kind of bloody idiot?'

There it was. The contempt. Time to repay it in kind.

'Yenst'll string me up if I don't at least try,' said Zettran, reaching around to pat the bulky vox-unit on his back. 'You think I've been lugging this bastard thing around for the exercise?'

'Bloody Throne,' said Dostoyev. 'Fine, then. Brother Titus!' Zettran swore under his breath as the Ultramarine came back around the corner of a slanting stairway.

'Yes?'

'We are to report back.'

'You think you can establish a link?'

'I have to try,' said Zettran.

'If you get through to your regiment,' said Titus, 'tell them to watch for a flak missile sent vertically upwards, no target. If they see it, send air support. Valkyries and Vendettas.'

'Brother Titus?' said Calistus, the disfigured flamer operative emerging from the stairway. 'Do we have need of reinforcement?'

'Perhaps. I fear the entire populace here has been tainted and gathered together somewhere. We may end up fighting them all at once, and their masters soon afterwards. If this happens, some area denial would be of great use to us.'

Zettran found it hard to believe the Adeptus Astartes would call upon the all-too-human Astra Militarum in a warzone, but he kept his expression level. It was no mean feat, given that his arm itched like crazy. He wanted nothing more than to scream, and to attack the Ultramarines with the closest weapon to hand, digging into their flesh to rip open their broad chests and bite into their hearts.

'And besides, if we find some more civilians that have not been compromised, air-lifting them out might be our only chance of getting them out of an active warzone.'

Ah, there it is. The fake concern for humanity,

Titus and Calistus moved off, considering the matter at a close.

'Well, Dostoyev?'

'Quickly, then. Find somewhere quiet but open.'

'I'll make it as fast as I can,' said Zettran. He paced over to the middle of a courtyard, ensuring he was out of Dostoyev's earshot, and opened a vox-channel.

Do it.

Zettran adjusted the bandwidth abacus with professional care, trying to find the frequency being used by the Truskans on the mainland. After a few tense minutes, he found it. It was thin, but he had a connection.

'*Vox-link active;*' said a dry-sounding voice, crackling and faint.

'This is Zettran of the Truskan One Hundred and Thirty-Second.'

'*Repeat?*'

'Jandro Zettran. Seconded to the Adeptus Astartes infiltration unit under

Squad Sevastus.'

'Understood. Report.'

'No resistance thus far. Do not send reinforcements. Repeat, do not reinforce, even if you observe false signals or signs of battle. This is an express request relayed from Sergeant Sevastus.'

'Acknowledged.'

'Zettran out.'

The vox-operator retuned the bandwidth abacus, seeking the channel he had stumbled across during the initial assault. He did not have to try too hard to remember; its details were burned into some part of his brain.

Your own people will have you killed. You have no choice.

An eerie whispering came over the vox, like the voices of a hundred damned voices all blending together. The sound of a distant bell, no more than an echo, rang in the distance.

'I don't know if you can hear this,' said Zettran in a low voice.

'Yessss...' came the reply. 'We lisssten.'

Somehow he had the feeling of being at the edge of a cliff, a drop from which there would be no recovery. Then he looked at the crook of his elbow and ran a finger across the hard ridge of teeth there.

'This is Jandro Zettran of the Truskan Snowhounds.'

He paused, bile thick in his throat.

'Yessss... continue...'

'I am part of a small group of ten Adeptus Astartes and two Astra Militarum inbound on your position from the southernmost pesciner district.' His resolve, rising through a sickly morass of self-hatred and jealous spite, hardened to a knife edge.

'I wish to defect.'

PART TWO

THE ASCENT

CHAPTER FIVE

THE HOUNDS RELEASED

THE BASILICANUM OF ST CAPILENE

'I wish to defect,' came the voice over the vox-unit.

It was the voice of a human, fallible and weak. Lord Thursk could taste the fear in his tone. It was invigorating, even in the wake of turning several thousand islanders to ravening lunatics with his finest creation. How he longed to hear the bell ring out once more.

'Lead them to us, novitiate Zettran,' he replied, fingers tracing a circle around the pommel of his daemonsword. 'We are ready for them.'

He waved dismissively at the stunted, three-legged mutant that was holding the vox-unit towards Thursk's snarling helm. The servant-thing retreated back into the shadows, muttering gibberish to itself through its ill-fitting gas mask. Thursk shot it a glance, and it folded itself into the corner of the colonnade amongst the desiccated remains of the basilicanum's previous incumbents. The mutant pressed its ear to the vox-unit once more, eyes rolling back behind the dirty glass of its lenses as it went into a listening-trance.

Just kill the wretch, said the voice in Lord Thursk's head. *You owe yourself a little treat now and then.* It was not his own thought, but the reedy, croaking tone of the one he thought of as the Crone. The Balethu Crone.

A hundred other voices whispered the same thing in mindless echo, her tribesmen all falling into line. As they always did.

Slaughter the wretch. Rip him to shreds. Just as you killed us.

How he hated those voices. Let the bell ring loud, he thought. Silence them, at least for a while.

No, said the Crone. *You cannot drown us out forever.*

Thursk laughed, long and well. He laughed so hard he had to lean against one of the pillars of the basilicanum, half-sculpted in the likeness of a daemon over the last few days. He felt moisture cloud his eyes, and blinked it away.

'Oh, but I can, old friend,' he managed. 'I can.'

'Lord Thursk?' asked one of his Chosen, a horn-headed killer named Agavamius.

'Just... just the voices, Agavamius.'

'We all hear them. They grow worse again.'

'They do.'

'Should we... can we ring the bell this hour?'

'I feel that may be wise,' said Thursk, straightening up. 'For all our sakes. But let them know to do it briefly, in case we inadvertently drive our new flock too far into madness.'

'Aye, my lord. And what of these interlopers? These fools that think themselves safe under their tattered cloak of secrecy?'

'We will disabuse them of that notion soon enough,' said Thursk. 'Let the Bloody Hound know I wish to speak to it.'

'At once,' said Agavamius, nodding and bringing his heels together with a crisp click of ceramite. It was a salute in the style of the Crimson Sabres, an unwelcome reminder of their Chapter's former incarnation, before they finally gave in to the voices. It made Thursk's skin crawl to witness it.

'And Agavamius?'

'Yes, Lord Thursk?'

'If you salute me in that manner once more, I will have Redclaw see to you.'

Thursk turned to a vast angular shadow in the back of the cathedral. Feeling his gaze upon it, that massive shape unfolded and came forward. Shafts of light played across a plated, blood-scabbed metal hide, eight piston-driven legs holding aloft a centauroid body capped with a hideous golden mask. It flexed its giant foreclaws, the guns on either side of its torso cycling into life.

Thursk would dearly love to see it cut loose, a vulgar display of power

that would cement his authority all the more. But Agavamius had served him well, over the years, and it would be an indulgence at best.

The Chosen bowed his head. 'I understand. The past should be left behind.'

'As you say.'

The heretic turned and strode off, the solid boom of his footsteps echoing in the perfect acoustics of the basilicanum.

Thursk walked slowly down the main nave, contemplating at length the deaths he intended to inflict on the insurgent Ultramarines. What a delicious surprise, he thought. They were so few in number they could likely be dealt with however he saw fit. One for Redclaw, that was a given if he ran the prey to ground. No doubt that unfortunate's demise would be over too soon; the daemon engine took great pleasure in physically ripping apart the Corpse-Emperor's slaves.

The renegade lord took off his gauntlet with a hiss of escaping air and ran his fingers down the side of the basilicanum's altar, appreciating the rough texture of the stone against his skin. He glanced sidelong at the corpse that had been nailed to the pitted block of seastone, the priest's stinking and flyblown organs open to the air as an offering to the Dark Gods. It was a pleasant distraction. To Thursk, no altar to the False Emperor should go without being profaned in such a fashion.

Nine left, then, with Redclaw's due. Another he would install in place of the current unfortunate upon the altar. He would take his time over that one. It would be a far worthier offering to the Dark Gods, and a blasphemy against the Emperor and the Adeptus Astartes alike.

Those that Khementus and his twisted followers killed during the coming assault would be acceptable losses. They performed their best when they had a prize dangled in front of them, always like dogs hungry for a slab of meat. Perhaps three or four would be slain, or succumb to their extensive wounds, before the rest were reclaimed. That would leave five or six for Thursk himself.

Plenty, if used properly.

The air grew cold, a crisping of frost creeping across the grave-slabs that formed the basilicanum's floor. He could hear fingers of ice crystals crawl across the stained glass windows above the altar, see the telltale-flickers of ghoulish shapes in the corners of his vision.

The Bloody Hound had dragged himself from his lair of bone.

A demented, multi-limbed shape crept up the stairs from the crypt sanctus. The air seemed to flicker and congeal around it, strange tendrils of light curling into the outlines of anguished faces and slobbering mouths. The creature had once been a Space Marine, but had become so twisted, so mutated beyond all reason, that it was now more akin to the daemon that possessed it. Its limbs ended in twitching, attenuated talons, its helm had cracked to form a fleshy maw across its width, and the vents of the power pack upon its broad back had elongated to become knives of bone that hissed dark smoke from gaping pores along its length.

Another of the ensorcelled creatures was close behind. Several more came in its wake, moving up the stairs on all fours as if they truly were the feral canids their fellow renegades saw them to be.

'Welcome, Khementus,' said Thursk. 'Welcome, my brothers in darkness.'

The first of the creatures hissed like a snake, extruding a pair of long black tongues. It looked around the mosaics and tapestries of the nave for signs of prey.

'We shall sound the bell soon,' continued the renegade lord. 'But first, I must ask you to hunt. You are so very good at it.'

At this, Khementus, known these days as the Bloody Hound, stood upright. The mention of a hunt, embellished with a little flattery, had its full attention.

'Your kindred, bolstered by Iron Brother Doxograd, will move into the city this very night. It is my wish that you hunt down, incapacitate and retrieve the strike force of Ultramarines that moves upon us even as we speak.'

Khementus the Bloody Hound licked its yellowed fangs, talons twitching.

'Thirteenth Legion...' it hissed. 'Ssspawn of the Reborn King.'

'Yes,' said Thursk. 'They are inbound as we speak from the southernmost pesciner districts. This time they are using stealth, rather than shock and speed, as their main weapon - or so they believe. Sniff them out.'

'And then eat them...'

'No, do not eat them, Khementus. Bring them back, alive. If you can't do that, drive them out into the open. Agavarnius and his band will do the rest.'

'Hound them...'

'Yes,' said Thursk. 'But do not kill them. If you do, I will punish your host body until it can no longer walk. I will see that you are trapped in an immobile shell.'

'We serve,' said Kherentus. 'For now.'

'That is satisfactory. *For now*', he mimicked. 'But should there come a day you decide not to, know that the daemon in my blade will consume you like a sweetmeat. Now go.'

The half-daemons slunk back down into their crypt, lope-crawling into the darkness. From there, they would venture out into the catacombs that ran through the island peak, sniffing out the pungent reek of self-importance until they found the Ultramarines that dared to move against him.

There was no better hunter than a heretic possessed, and no more trusted warriors than Agavamius and his fellow Chosen to follow them. The days ahead would be full of fresh screams, if all went well.

And for a while, Lord Thursk would know peace.

CHAPTER SIX

INTO THE DARKNESS

THE CRYPT WARRENS

'They must meet us further up the peak,' said Aethor, frowning in annoyance at the Astra Militarum troopers behind him. 'Their sighting lumins could give away our positions, and they cannot see in the dark.'

'Aethor has a point,' said Sevastus ruefully. Behind him, the rest of his combat squad were greeting Titus and his unit with warrior's handshakes and hands on shoulders. 'At least the Guardsmen will blend in well enough in the streets. Far too open on the shoulders of the island, away from the village. Any competent sentry would have our position in no time.'

'Anyone would think a group of ten bright blue giants was conspicuous,' said Zettran. Aethor watched as the Guardsman approached, insouciance in his step. 'Glad you've found a way to make your problem our fault, though.'

'We will likely see you on the uppermost level beneath the cliff,' replied Aethor. 'I will find a way through soon enough. I'm almost certain these lower levels will lead upwards to common domiciles, maybe chambers of worship. There might even be a way to the basilicanum itself.'

'As you say,' said Titus, peering into the gloom before turning back to the Guardsmen. 'Be careful, Gunner Dostoyev.'

'No objections there,' said Dostoyev. 'This whole damned island is haunted, I'm sure of it.'

Aethor gave a laugh without mirth. 'I've yet to find the foe I can't take down with a good sharp knife.'

'That's why you're going first,' said Calistus, a glint in his eyes. 'Let whatever lurks inside know true terror.'

'Follow your instincts, Aethor, that's good enough for me,' said Brother-Sergeant Sevastus. 'Helms on. We're going deep.'

Nodding, the knifeman moved onwards, ducking through a low archway carved into a knotwork of granite roses. The passageway beyond was near pitch black, but his auto-senses recalibrated in no time. The drip of liquid in the distance filtered through, a faint *plip-plip-plip* on the edge of hearing. His photosensors rendered the crypts beyond in steely greys and wan white; as the light of the outside world faded away, the smell of chalky, wet rock was undercut by faint traces of decay and animal faeces.

'The glorious life of the vanguard operative,' hissed Calistus behind him.

'Quiet, flamebait,' said Aethor. 'I'm concentrating.'

The Ultramarine moved deftly into the darkness, eyes scanning every nook and cranny for signs of ambush. He saw rows of coffins on either side, mouldering and bulging oddly with damp. This was the area where the poor housed their dead, that much was obvious, for the corridors were roughly hewn and none of the alcoves and plinths were quite level. Many of the offshoots led further into the peak, a maze of crypts and catacombs winding onwards as he paced further inside.

Aethor found a few coffins with tin plates detailing the surnames of those inside, then a few with brass plaques. He followed those until he reached a strain of coffins with copper corners, then a handful with silver plates, embossed with dates of birth and expiry.

'You make good speed,' said Sevastus over the squad vox-link. *'Do you have a lead?'*

'Following signs of wealth,' said Aethor, internalising his reply to keep it in his throat. 'The richest ones will be closest to the basilicanum, by my reckoning. Most standard cultures believe the more they hand over to the Ministorum, the closer to the Emperor they get.'

'A sad truth,' said the sergeant. *'Found any stairs upwards?'*

Aethor squinted, his helm increasing the contrast of the shapes ahead. 'Just an incline. We'll have to go further in.'

'Acknowledged. We're not far behind you.'

For a second, Aethor thought he saw something move in the darkness. His hand strayed to his bolter, but then he shook his head and readied his knife

instead. A bolt-round detonation in such close confines would echo through the entire catacomb complex, bringing anyone patrolling within to their location in a matter of minutes:

He scraped the knife across his scalp, feeling the tiny needles of stubble part beneath its edge. He licked the edge, spat, then went over it again, moving with practised ease until his entire head was clean and shining as a king's golden orb of office.

'Aethor,' came a crooning whisper from up ahead. '*Ae-thor...*'

The Ultramarine froze, eyes narrowed.

'Sergeant,' he said over the closed vox. 'We have no one further in, do we?'

'Hold,' he said. '*Dolor. Any life signs, brother?*'

'Nothing,' said the auspex specialist over the squad vox. '*Well, nothing conventional, at any rate. The occasional odd glitches.*'

'Clarify?' said Aethor.

'*Mere ripples, likely due to these subterranean echo chambers.*'

Aethor nodded. 'Let me know if you find anything concrete.'

'*Acknowledged.*'

Aethor pushed further into the tomb complex, ears straining for anything more significant than the dripping of condensation or the faint scratching of insects and other vermin. He passed a shelf stacked full of skulls, each of which had a wired jaw and the skeleton of a dead fish protruding from its mouth. In one chamber, a vast chandelier made of femurs, tibias and tiny decorative phalanges dominated the room. The smallest bones ticked and clacked together as if caught in some wind, despite the fact there was not so much as a breeze this far underground.

'*Aethor... Malacus Aethor...*'

A drowned corpse was there in front of him. Hollow orbs stared from a bulging, green-grey sac of a face. Aethor's knife went to work, but the apparition was already fading quickly to nothingness.

Aethor felt vaguely sick. The spectre had unmistakably displayed a tattoo of a sea spider on its forehead. Just like old Jakar Thransk, back on Talassar. Black fluid also leaked from a knife wound in its neck. Right where he had stabbed Thransk to death in his previous life.

'*Ae-thor...*' came the breathy whisper from the crypts ahead. '*We remember...*'

The Ultramarine squinted into the gloom, but could see nothing there. He ventured further into the darkness, the grainy pict-feed of his helm piecing together the blocky shapes of squared pillars and sarcophagi in the alcoves.

Every so often he had to duck to get beneath a rune-inscribed archway, walk stooped to clear a low ceiling or shuffle sidelong through a room filled with debris. Always he sought to move upwards, taking every stairwell or slope he could find. Where he encountered a dead end, he sent a halt-rune back to his squad over the helm link before returning, conferring with Dolor, then setting off again in a different direction.

Passing through the dusty tracts of a chamber packed with mildewed coffins, Aethor saw that a few of them were missing their lids. He glanced inside one as he passed. Lying in there were the mummified remains of his older sister, her once-golden hair braided just as she favoured and secured with the same leaf-shaped clip.

'Half a galaxy away,' muttered Aethor. 'Nothing here but tricks.'

'You spoke, brother?' came Sevastus' voice from inside his helm.

'Nothing, brother-sergeant.'

'Are you experiencing hallucinations?'

'Perhaps,' he admitted. 'Visions from a former life.'

'Interesting. Gaiun says the same.'

'Some kind of empyrric resonance, perhaps. I will keep my wits clear.'

'Let me know if you need reinforcement. Calistus has your back.'

'I do not need it,' said Aethor, his tone sharper than he intended.

'Very well. Primarch bless your knife.'

Aethor sighed, and moved on.

After another five minutes of pushing on through the catacombs, the Ultramarine thought he saw a glimpse of light in the distance. It was inconstant, more like a will-o-the-wisp than a shaft of illumination. Unlikely to be a way out, thought Aethor. More likely it was something living.

Or at least something sentient.

He kept absolutely still, straining to hear, half expecting more whispers to come from the chambers in the distance. *'Aethor,'* came Dolor's voice over the vox. *'There's something up ahead. I have a fix.'*

He eye-flicked a rune of acknowledgement, tucking himself back into an

alcove amongst a scattering of old tallow candles. One fell from the ledge, dislodged by his elbow. He lanced his knife down, the tip of the blade piercing it through and arresting its fall. He breathed out through his nose before pulling the candle upwards, working it free and replacing it without a sound.

There was a grinding from up ahead, low and brief. It sounded like ceramite on rock. He flicked a query rune at Dolor's sigil.

'They have significant mass,' came Dolor's reply. *'Be ready.'*

A stretched, pallid face wound out of the darkness, bearded with drooling ectoplasm, only to taper away to nothing. Then came another, weaving in and out of shadow. This time it was female, its silent, screaming maw distended as long as his forearm as it spiralled past his hiding place.

As if the apparitions were followed by sound, there was a weird moaning on the cusp of hearing, detached and rising in pitch. Aethor heard a bass thump, subsonic almost, then another moan. The sound wound through the catacombs, mournful and threatening all at once. He felt the hairs rise on the backs of his arms. Perhaps, once, he would have thought of heading back, seeking the safety of his brothers. But Aethor was an expert at channelling such negative emotion into anger, making it more fuel for the killing to come.

Another mournful cry, rising again in pitch and intensity. It grew louder, building to a chorus of damned souls, wailing from the depths of the hellish dimension of the warp.

It felt to Aethor as if the sound were rattling the front of his mind, like the white-knuckled hands of a madman thrashing at the bars of his asylum cube.

Then, all of a sudden, it was gone.

Aethor took another glance out of his alcove, but saw nothing. There was no sign of any apparitions, not so much as an echo.

Another bass thump, then another.

The light was back, flitting between the pillars up ahead. There was the sound of breaking glass in the distance, twisting and distorting into a susurrantion of whispers.

'Aethor,' they said in the back of his mind. *'Aethor. We have come for your soul.'*

The syllables sounded wet and disturbing, as if being squeezed out from a

mouth frill of blood. Aethor fingered the tip of his knife. He was uncertain what good it would do against intangible foes, but some part of him found it comforting nonetheless.

'Aethor... you are already dead.'

There was another sound like breaking glass, and a sudden sigh, right next to his ear. For a moment, Aethor's mind was filled with images of glass knives being driven into his unprotected face, jagged triangles sliding under the skin, cutting tendons and snapping as splinters against the bone of his skull.

Something was waking in his chest, something that had been dead and buried for decades. It twitched, stirring like a hibernating beast awakened from a long comatose state. That suffocating shadow felt connected to his hearts, his lungs, his every nerve. A paralytic chill seeped into his mind, stealing his certainty.

Whatever it was, he did not welcome it. Only when the memory of being trapped in a sea cave as a child resurfaced at the back of his mind, bubbling through the hypno-indoctrination of his time in training as an Adeptus Astartes inductee, did he remember what that feeling was called.

Fear.

Aethor eye-flicked Calistus' rune on his helm display. Then he slid out of the alcove, pacing forward with his knife held point-first. Any phantom or spirit that dared crawl from its tomb would taste its hypersteel edge. There was a reason he blessed the blade with a war prayer before every engagement, just as he had prayed to the Emperor as a young man.

He turned the corner of a pillar, and came face to face with a nightmare.

A bestial hulk wreathed in ectoplasmic faces lashed out at him with a crab-like claw. Aethor met the strike with his blade, the tip sinking deep into ruddy flesh, then leaned back low as the blow came on. The pincer whistled over his head to smash into a stone pillar, blasting flinders of rock in all directions.

He kicked the vile thing in the knee as he stood behind its swing, the blow connecting hard enough to buckle its joint backwards. It did not cry out. Instead it brought its other knee forward fast to connect with his gut, then backhanded him in the neck. There was a moment of weightlessness, then a massive impact as he smashed into something solid - a headless statue above some anonymous grave.

The mutant creature roared, the sound echoing around the chamber as it paced forward like some primeval predator on the hunt.

A sidelong column of fire billowed from the mouth of the passageway. It shot out with such force it hurled the apparition, burning, to one side. The chamber filled with the stink of promethium. Calistus was close.

Aethor got a good look at the creature, blackened and flailing in the sudden conflagration. Its silhouette was that of an Adeptus Astartes warrior, though bulkier, swollen and distended. Twisted horns sprouted from its shoulders and helm like the branches of an evil-looking tree, and an unearthly light came from its fanged mouth. It thrashed in the fires, rolling behind a stone crypt with a growl of outrage as Calistus' flames drove it back.

Seeing his chance, Aethor put all his weight behind the lid of the sarcophagus. With a low rumble, it ground off its locking points. He gave a short bark of triumph as he pushed the great stone slab over on top of the fallen heretic and pinned it in place. Aethor sprinted around the sarcophagus and stabbed the beast in its neck over and over, like a frenzied razorwasp lancing its poison barb into its prey.

Still the mutant struggled, its arm-pincer thrashing and clacking a few inches from his head. He changed angle and stabbed up into the thing's chest until his arm muscles burned and his hand was slick with unclean blood. When the creature finally stopped moving, he stepped away.

Calistus moved into the room, the pilot light of his flamer sending shadows dancing across the walls and ceiling. Aethor moved towards him, only to see another of the monstrous warriors loom from the darkness in his brother's blind spot.

'Brother! Your flank!'

The bestial thing opened shark-like jaws, lunging to bite onto the part of Calistus' neck between his pauldron and his power pack. Aethor already had his bulky pistol out as he closed the distance. He sent a bolt to meet it, blasting the creature backwards a moment before the mass-reactive charge detonated. Shards of skull and unclean flesh spattered Calistus, the ringing blast loud as that of a grenade detonated at close range. Aethor followed up fast, putting two more rounds in its abdomen just to make sure.

'My thanks,' said Calistus. 'What exactly are these new friends of yours?' The beast's lower jaw was still hanging, teeth embedded deep, from the

flamer specialist's pauldron.

'Heretics,' growled Aethor, batting the disembodied jawbone into the corner of the crypt before turning to the darkness once more. 'Heretics on the hunt.'

'These aren't just renegades, Malacus,' said Calistus darkly. 'That first one should have been consumed by flame, but it was resistant to the conflagration. How many times did you have to stab it before it stopped moving?'

'Thirty-seven, all told.'

'I believe there's the taint of the daemon about them.'

'Evidently,' said Aethor.

'More hostiles inbound,' said Brother Dolor as he ducked through the archway at the end of the room. There was a dull thump, then another. Dust trickled from cracks in the ceiling. 'And something bigger with them.'

'We will have need of Remus,' said Aethor. 'I can't knife them all at once. If they have a heavy war asset, I'm not the best warrior to take it on.'

'You won't have to,' said Sergeant Sevastus, moving into the room with the barrel of his grav-pistol panning left and right. 'Where are they, Brother Dolor?'

The auspex specialist squinted, his square-jawed features underlit by wan green light. 'Two coming from the left, higher ground. Two from the right. They are seeking to entrap us.'

'Then we go left, and fast.'

Sevastus was already moving. He planted a hand and vaulted over a stone coffin towards the archway leading left, landing in a crouch with his gun raised. Aethor followed up, sliding across the coffin's slab-like top to take a position with knife in one hand and bolt pistol in the other.

Gaiun and Castor took up gunner stances, resting their boltguns on the back of the sarcophagus and turning their shoulders so their pauldrons covered the majority of their profiles. Remus moved to cover the right, the tube of his missile launcher reflecting a thin green line in the light of Dolor's auspex. Titus was close behind. The veteran warrior's bionic eye glowed cherry red in the gloom, leaving a trace as he moved through the tight confines of the antechamber.

Something truly hideous burst from the sloping passageway to the left. It was huge, bigger even than the creatures Aethor had fought. The goliath

creature roared as it barrelled forward into a storm of bolt shells.

Gaiun fired three bolts alongside each of Castor's carefully placed shots, a marriage of quantity and precision that Aethor had seen fell a raging titanother. Where the self-propelled projectiles struck home, they detonated with a series of wet thuds, blasting craters of flesh wide open in the bestial thing's half-armoured torso.

Aethor had already mentally discounted the creature when a clutch of fleshy red tentacles lashed out from its wound to wrap around his arm. On instinct he recoiled, yanking his arm back, then bit hard into the tentacle nearest his mouth.

The horrible appendage tasted beyond foul, its tang that of ash and pus and soured wine all at once. He ground his teeth into it nonetheless, triggering his Betcher's Gland to loose a gobbet of acidic spit. The tentacle sizzled in his mouth, dissolving fast. It recoiled, and he opened his jaws to let the pseudopod fly free before sending a bolt to follow it. He brought the knife around fast, slashing through the second tentacle that gripped his arm and jabbing its tip into a third. They too jerked backwards. Then his bolt detonated within the twitching creature, and it finally fell still.

No one held Malacus Aethor immobile, he thought, spitting a gobbet of fleshy slurry onto a nearby grave. Not since he had shaved his head.

'Warp-touched,' said Gaiun.

'What gave it away?' asked Castor drily.

Aethor scoped out the room with quick, darting glances as Gaiun came up in support. A shadow was lengthening at the top of the slope. Sevastus was already moving forward, planting a foot on the abdomen of the tentacled creature to pivot into the corridor. His momentum carried him into another mutant creature emerging from the darkness, its face a hideous blend of insect and human.

The frill force of the sergeant's weight caught the monstrosity in the midsection even as Gaiun's bolt hit home. Aethor blinked in surprise as Sevastus simply bounced off as if he had run into a wall. Gaiun's shot struck no more than a glancing blow, and the bolt ricocheted free before detonating on the wall behind.

Cackling, the creature grabbed Sevastus in its distended, elongated talons and hurled him back towards Aethor as if he weighed no more than a plank of wood. Aethor moved forward, catching his sergeant in one arm and

arresting his fall even as he loosed a bolt from his pistol with the other. The bolt struck the creature in its gut, the detonation sending it reeling.

An unnatural snarl came from behind. Aethor glanced back to see another group of the possessed heretics emerging from the easternmost passage.

Titus hammered the first of them with a triple volley. Remus took aim and loosed a krak missile from the back of the chamber, the smooth whoosh of its launch swiftly followed by a deafening boom. The detonation blasted one of the creatures into a spattering of ruined flesh, and a cloud of stone fragments burst from the passageway, filling it with smoke and rock dust.

'Change of plan,' said Sevastus. 'Forward. We need more room.'

Aethor nodded, vaulting over a stone coffin to charge into the darkness beyond. There was another chamber a little way to the north with a high ceiling. Room enough to fight.

Hearing the thrum of Sevastus' grav-pistol behind him, Aethor smiled grimly. They would be out of here soon enough, and then his brothers would shine, their weapons bringing the Emperor's wrath down on the heads of the renegades. Whilst caught in the claustrophobic confines of the lesser crypts, they had failed to maximise the use of their firepower. With the possible exception of Sevastus, every one of his brothers preferred a firefight, and he was loath to deny them.

There was something in the back of Aethor's mind, a low thumping that told him to be cautious, to let his brothers move into place before him. But he still felt shaken from the ghastly apparitions he had witnessed in the corridor, and something in his soul wanted to attack all the harder.

Kill or be killed. To Malacus Aethor, they were words to live by.

Thud, thud, thud. Footsteps, they had to be. Aethor paused, bringing up his blade.

The wall next to him gave way in a billowing cloud of dust. A wrecking ball of metal, corrupted flesh and raw, screaming hatred came barrelling through.

Aethor flailed backwards, the armour of his breastplate caved in by a blow of tremendous force. He could feel shards of ceramite digging into his ribs as he skidded across the chamber's flagstones. Had the bones of his chest not been fused together into the black carapace that guarded his vital organs, he would have been killed.

Smashing its way through the wall before him, a monstrous metal behemoth bellowed in lunatic rage.

Then something struck the back of Aethor's head, and darkness claimed him.

'Muster on my point,' Sevastus shouted. 'Aethor is down!'

'The corridor's still blocked,' replied Gaiun. 'These things don't go down easily.'

Depressing the activation stud of his chainsword, Brother-Sergeant Sevastus made for the end of the sloping corridor once more. The insect-headed creature he had charged had recovered from Aethor's shot. Unmoved by the looping guts spilling from its stomach wound, it gave a shrill, reedy scream as it charged forward, mandibles clacking.

Sevastus strode to meet it. He raised his grav-pistol and held its trigger fast, feeling the ancient weapon thrumming in his hand. The pale green light of the pistol's field played across the mutated thing, and its arcane field technology immediately went to work, multiplying the creature's mass. It fell to its knees with a crack of ceramite on stone, the impact so heavy that spidery fractures ran out in all directions.

Then, with an awful noise, the thing crunched into itself. Ceramite split, flesh bulged, bones ground together and broke into jagged spurs that punched through its flesh as it collapsed. Sevastus kept the beam focused on the heretic until it had folded up, crushed like a tin can full of bad meat under a perfect sledgehammer blow. Blood, mingled with nameless fluids, ran down the ramp towards him.

The grav-pistol's destructive potential came from its ability to use its target's weight against it; against an enemy in dense and bulky power armour, it was lethal.

'Now,' shouted Sevastus back to his squad, 'we go north.' His brothers moved in close.

There was an awful crash, like the sound of a building coming down. The thing that had sent Aethor flying moved into the wan green light of Dolor's auspex. A corrupted Dreadnought.

Sometimes known to the Adeptus Terra as a Helbrute, it was a walking tank, built to carry the sarcophagus of a barely living warrior whose entire existence revolved around violent revenge. The monstrosity had a flexing

power fist large enough to crush an ogryn on one arm and a daemon-mawed ectoplasma cannon on the other. Massive, heavily armed, and with piston-driven strength in its short but powerful limbs, it was death wrought in layered ceramite and adamantium.

Sevastus turned his grav-pistol on the thing, holding its beam on the creature as it smashed its way through a duster of granite urns. Shards of stone and shattered skeleton dropped sharply as they were caught in the intense gravity field, but the giant beast simply waded through its uncanny energies, its hydraulic strength yanking it free from the arcane field. The Dreadnought brought its gargoyle-mawed cannon to bear on him, the weapon screaming like a tortured banshee as plasma boiled in its throat.

The brother-sergeant dived sidelong as a simmering blast of superheated energy lit the crypt complex in stark white energy. Turning his shoulder to roll between two stone coffins, Sevastus crouched and ran into striking distance. As the brutish thing stomped around the coffins, he saw Gaiun and Castor firing volleys of bolts into its flank, but it did not so much as twitch.

Sevastus leapt over a fallen statue, his chainsword gnawing at the beast's steel tendons. The teeth juddered as they sent sprays of sparks arcing left and right. A backwash of flame hit him, and the beast lumbered past, going after Calistus with a scream of outrage. Sevastus stood up only to see a crab-clawed mutant smash into Castor, tackling him so hard he knocked Gaiun off balance too. Three more of the twisted daemon-things stalked into the chamber, the largest of their number howling as the ghostly faces around it screamed in unison.

'Recover Aethor and fall back!' shouted Sevastus. 'There are too many!'

His battle-brothers were swift to respond. He saw Vanial prime a krak grenade and flick it at the beast, his timing so perfect it detonated right in front of the creature's helm. The explosion would have torn the head from a Space Marine, but the blast only knocked it backwards, the Helbrute's power fist shielding its horned mask as it crushed flagstones and scattered statuary underfoot.

The creature's bellow of anger filled the room as it flailed wildly, temporarily blinded. Titus darted under its grasping power fist and ran into the gloom, picking up his fallen battle-brother Aethor and hoisting him onto his shoulder. Sevastus backed onto the ramp, still slick with the

crushed remains of the warrior he had slain with his grav-pistol. He ran to cover the corner as Gaiun and Castor hammered firepower into the daemon-possessed Space Marines closing in on their position.

'Close ranks,' he shouted. 'We have to keep moving.'

He turned and ran headlong up the ramp, hoping it would open out into a wider chamber where they could bring their guns to bear.

Out of the darkness came a monstrous mockery of a Space Marine, its fleshy helm split vertically into two strange pseudo-jaws that clacked and thrashed with ropes of spittle.

'Your Corpse-Emperor has forsaken you,' it said in High Gothic, its tones glottal and alien.

Sevastus ducked a cabled blade-limb as it lanced towards him, the blow glancing off the top of his power pack as he rammed his shoulder into its cracked breastplate. It staggered back as he pivoted and rammed his chainsword hard into its exposed features. The whirring teeth of the motorised weapon chewed its drooping jaws in a spray of black blood. He kept pushing, his blade biting into its distended skull with a scream of protest and the vile smell of cooking bone.

'You were saying?' hissed Sevastus.

As its head split apart, the monstrous thing fell backwards with a thud. A strange spectral emanation emerged from its body, twisting as if in tortuous agony before dissipating in the cold darkness.

'Brother-sergeant?' said Gaiun.

'It has been dealt with,' he replied. 'Keep moving.'

The corridor around him, lined with spiral pillars, led to a larger hall with solemn-faced statues ranging around its walls. Aethor's notion of following the wealth seemed to be paying off. Sevastus could see the sarcophagi were getting more widely spaced, and the ceilings higher. Still the rooms were cluttered enough that the Dreadnought in the crypts below would struggle to reach them - even if, in time, it would likely smash its way through every obstacle in its path.

At the end of the hallway was an altar, its massive marble slabs engraved with images of the sainted primarchs. Stout golden candles had been placed around its periphery in a circle, so long ago they were thick with dust.

Sevastus saw in that altar a measure of hope. He ran towards it, checking

the rune-signals of his team on his helm display to see them not far behind. All nine were still the green of active service.

'Thank the Golden Throne,' he said to himself before opening a vox-channel. 'Calistus. These things are part daemonic, by your reckoning.'

'It would explain their resilience.'

'And the extent of their mutation. Brothers, muster on me. We use that altar as cover and point defence. Calistus, light our way out, but wait till they get close.'

'Of course.'

The Ultramarines ran hard across the hallway, stepping through the ring of candles and taking position at the dais of marble that supported the altar. Titus shrugged Aethor's unconscious form on top of it, checking his brother's vital signs briefly before stepping back to rejoin the gun line. Sevastus jumped atop the altar and scanned the darkness while Dolor and Garus reloaded their bolters in gunner's crouches beneath him. Remus stood on the other side, resting the tube of his missile launcher atop the slab of the altar.

Howls came from the midnight-black tunnels to either side of the room, the sounds something between the hunting calls of canid predators and the shrieks of the damned.

'Here they come,' said Dolor. 'Some from the corridor we just left, some south-south-west, some due east. More than ten of them, maybe twenty. The glitches make it hard to tell.'

'We have enough gifts for all of them,' said Vanial.

A black shape detached from the shadows above, barrelling towards them. Its bat-like wings unfolded around it to expose a nightmarish ribcage of bone, red-hot energy boiling in its intercostal spaces. From the archway beneath it came a jackal-headed nightmare, loping on all fours.

Remus let fly a krak missile, the projectile soaring in towards the winged figure. The creature shrouded itself with the leather of its pinions in a blur of darkness, and the missile simply shimmered from existence.

'That's not possible,' said the heavy weapons trooper. 'I—'

Dolor, Castor and Gaiun opened fire, the deep booming roar of their bolters filling the hall with a percussive thunder as three more of the creatures ran headlong towards them from the eastern passageway. The bolter shells detonated amongst them, but on they came. The three-eyed

freak at their fore laughed shrilly, his needle-toothed smile splitting from ear to ear.

'These ones take some killing,' said Gaiun.

'Scatter them, Vanial.'

The grenadier nodded, taking a frag grenade from his bandolier and short-priming it. He hurled it hard. The cylinder bounced from the temple of the three-eyed mutant before detonating with spectacular force. It sent three of the daemonic warriors staggering in a cloud of rock dust and blood.

Sevastus nodded in approval, turning his grav-pistol on the winged beast and loosing its green beam. The creature leapt over the shot, its wings snapping out, and glided towards them with its mouth wide.

'I have it,' said Remus. 'Just a few more moments...'

Just as the creature was swooping in to grab at Dolor, the heavy weapons expert pulled the trigger. This time Remus' missile caught the target centre mass, sending it rocketing backwards before blasting it apart in a shower of spattering gore.

'Good shot, brother,' said Dolor, wiping bubbling ichor from his auspex with the flat edge of his bolter. 'But try for earlier next time.'

Nearby, the cluster of heretics knocked off balance by Vanial's grenade had scabbled back to their feet. They were racing towards him, their evil leers replaced by expressions of stone cold fury and bloodlust. They moved fast; Sevastus noticed that several had extra joints in their legs and two ran dog-like on all fours.

'Sergeant,' said Titus. 'We may need to engage close.'

'Aethor's still unconscious,' said Gaiun.

'There are more inbound from the east and west,' said Titus. 'A lot more.'

Sevastus grimaced. Spilling from the corridors on either side of the hall were dozens of the creatures, each a repugnant mockery of a Space Marine. They sprinted towards the tight circle of Ultramarines around the altar, baying for blood.

'Dead!' they hissed. 'We shall eat the dead!'

The largest of their number, a giant swathed in trailing spectral faces, laughed hollowly as his fellow creatures surrounded the Ultramarines. Bolters spat fire and fury, but the few that were bowled backwards or blasted limb from limb by Castor and Gaiun's bolter fire were quickly

replaced. The ring of heretics was closing tighter with every moment.

Calistus sent a wide arc of fire searing out. He panned the flamer's gouting inferno in a hemisphere, then strode around to the other side of the altar to do the same. A wall of fire roared brief and close, its heat so intense Sevastus could feel it singe his face. It ebbed away to leave only patches of dancing flame behind.

Those, and tongues of fire on the devotional candles around the altar, now lit and burning bright.

The daemon-possessed heretics recoiled as if rebounding from a physical wall. The hall echoed to a chorus of agonised screams as they turned away, scrambled back and staggered in confusion. Sevastus noticed with a mixture of curiosity and satisfaction that the mutated parts of their power armour were gouting black smoke - even those that had not been caught in Calistus' flame.

'Target close,' said Sevastus. 'Let us remind these blasphemies against humanity what it is to fight well.'

As one, the battle-brothers opened fire at the creatures nearest them. Bolter shells ripped great chunks of ceramite and flesh from the twisted creatures before them, their foulness lit in the strobing light of explosions.

Gaiun emptied an entire clip into the largest of their number, blasting craters in his armour and ripping his limbs free in a welter of blood. Garus, with his bolter in one hand and his pistol in the other, put mass-reactive rounds in two targets at once, head flicking left and right as he put down one reeling target after another.

Brother Castor methodically head-shotted three of the renegades in quick succession, putting his bolts into their faceplates even as they clawed at their eyes in pain. Remus sent another krak missile into a winged horror crawling along the ceiling, bringing it down in a shower of rock and broken ceramite.

Sevastus grinned as he caught one of the loping monsters in the beam of his grav-pistol, the uncanny energies crushing it under its own weight. It buckled in on itself, black ichor spurting from the joints of its armour.

'Intensify south!' he shouted.

Calistus swept a great tongue of fire around the altar once more. This time, the daemon-cursed creatures burned, blackening in the intense heat of the ignited promethium. The Space Marines turned their attention to the

mutant warriors behind them, their bolters blasting a channel through the ring of assailants even as a frag missile from Remus thumped into a knot of the creatures.

'South exit,' shouted Sevastus, leaping from the altar. 'Calistus, keep them busy.'

'With pleasure,' growled Calistus, sending out bursts of flame that kept a clutch of the armoured creatures at bay.

Whilst heaving Aethor's unconscious form onto his shoulder with a grunt of effort, Sevastus noticed the bas-relief on the side of the altar depicting a fallen warrioress. She was a saint, by her halo, enshrined at great cost in the belief that dignifying her mortal remains would make a difference to those still living. Her tomb had proved a useful vantage point, if nothing else.

After surrounding Sevastus with a shield of bodies, the Ultramarines broke from the altar at a run. A shape loomed from the flames to the west, a boar-snouted helm emerging into the light. Charging, Vanial shouldered the gruesome creature to the side as Sevastus and his warriors barrelled towards the south exit. The sergeant heard the scream of metal as the boar-faced mutant's talons raked down Vanial's power pack, leaving deep grooves in its ceramite. Then the creature was blasted back by a shot from Gaiun. It reeled away in an off-kilter spin, and Vanial was suddenly free. The bass thump of a detonation confirmed Sevastus' suspicion that the grenadier would not have left his assailant without a parting gift.

The Ultramarines sprinted for the south exit, Gaiun overtaking them to take point. He disappeared into the darkness beyond, Sevastus close on his heels.

Though the brother-sergeant dared not admit it, he could tell by Dolor's lack of intel that they were fighting to stay one step ahead of their enemies, and little else.

They were lost.

Zettran heard his fellow Truskan growl in frustration as he picked another thorn-spike out of his leg. Third in as many minutes. 'You are sure this is the best way up?' said Dostoyev, turning back to face Zettran.

'No,' replied the vox-operator, looking up at the mile-long spread of wilderness scrub that led up the sharp, incline. 'But we're committed to it

now.' A similar sight stretched out behind them, a field of white spike-thistles swaying in the breeze.

'I knew we should have gone with the Ultramarines,' said Dostoyev.

'Through a bunch of lightless crypts? We'd only hold them back.'

'At least with them we could fight our way out of trouble. If we're spotted by one of these renegades out here in the open, we'll be dead in seconds. I honestly can't see how we're going to make it out of this alive.'

Zettran said nothing. His arm was itching, burning, even twitching involuntarily, and not just the inside of his elbow. His whole arm felt like it was on fire. Even should they somehow make it back to the mainland, he had no real chance of survival. As soon as Commissar Yenst found out about his mutation, he was as good as dead.

He trudged on, the straps of his vox-unit cutting into his shoulders. That feeling, at least, he was used to. He tried to concentrate on the dull, familiar ache, using it to blot out the horrendous secret under his uniform.

It was no good. His arm felt like it was suffocating, and him with it. The wound-mouth had to have air. Had to breathe.

Take a good look.

Zettran rolled up his sleeve, careful not to brush the rough cloth against the raw lips of the suppurating wound. The opening in his elbow seemed to sigh, its flat, blood-flecked teeth parting to reveal a mass of pus and blood inside. The stink was so pungent it was all he could do not to vomit onto the bracken..

He felt something harden inside his soul, and a black mood overcame him like a thunderhead passing in front of the sun.

'We'll never make it up there in time,' said Dostoyev. 'And if we do, what chance do we have of making a meaningful contribution before they kill us?'

'Not much,' admitted Zettran. He doubled his pace, coming up behind Dostoyev as the trooper picked his way between two especially thorny bushes. 'I have a better idea.'

'Let's have it, then,' said Dostoyev, trudging away without turning.

Zettran shrugged his vox-unit from his shoulders as he came, hefting the bulky block of metal high.

Then he brought it down on the back of Dostoyev's head, splitting his skull and pitching him face first into a thicket of evil-looking spines.

* * *

Sergeant Sevastus was the first out of the cramped corridor, finally able to shrug Aethor's dead weight against a door jamb and pause for just long enough to set his shoulders and stretch his sword-arm. A half-finished mosaic floor led to a simple stone bridge across a natural fissure in the peak's interior. The span looked ancient; growths of moss and ragged strands of plant matter hung from every crack and imperfection of the stone. Below the bridge was a sheer drop into the darkness.

His auto-senses automatically compensating, Sevastus could just about make out closely packed statuary and monument aquilas at the base of the fissure below. Some manner of family tomb, perhaps, its finite space over-subscribed by far too many graves.

'Go!' he shouted, waving Dolor and Gaiun across as he shouldered Aethor once more. 'Checkpoint protocol. Firing line on the far side.'

'Aye, brother-sergeant!'

The Ultramarines ran across the span, two abreast, until all but Calistus and Sevastus were over. The flamer operative squeezed great gouts of ignited promethium from his weapon, each shot arcing into the chamber they had just vacated, but fell shapes advanced through the flickering inferno whenever the flames burned low. A haunting laughter came through the sound of crackling flame.

'Back up,' said Sevastus. 'The bridge itself is far more defensible.'

'It is that,' said Calistus, loosing a last burst. 'Which is fortunate. I'm almost out.' He turned, and at that moment a blood-encrusted claw shot out of the flame behind him, snatching at his head.

Some sixth sense saw Calistus slip forward at the last moment, but the blow smashed into him nonetheless, bowling him into Sevastus. The sergeant grabbed the flamer operative around the pauldrons, turning his staggered momentum into a pull-and-twist motion that all but hurled Calistus towards the other side of the bridge. In the process his foot slipped on a patch of moss, and for a heart-stopping second, Sevastus teetered over the darkness below. Only Aethor's weight kept him from unbalancing and toppling over the side of the bridge.

A giant warrior wreathed in spectral faces burst from the flames. Bolt shells blasted towards it, filling the bridge section with thunder, but each

of the shells detonated a few feet away from the champion as if hitting an invisible shield.

There was a tremendous crash from below the bridge, followed by a shrieking roar. A bolt of ectoplasma shot up from the fissure, narrowly missing Sevastus' pauldron. He cried out as he caught sight of the rampaging Helbrute they had fought in the crypt, fighting the urge to drop and flatten himself on the bridge.

'Beware below!'

The war machine was smashing its way from a side passage, its gargoyle-mouthed cannon glowing a baleful red in the shadows. Another bolt of ectoplasma blasted from its arm-gun, this time aimed at the Ultramarines that had formed a firing line on the far side of the gulf. They ducked back into cover at Sevastus' warning, but the fell energies of the cannon splashed across the columns and splattered the Space Marines behind, eliciting shouts of surprise and pain as they burned through ceramite.

The ghost-wreathed heretic that had sought to cross the bridge was halfway across, now.

'Take Aethor to safety,' said Sevastus, shrugging his brother's unconscious form over to Calistus as he withdrew. 'I have this.'

He levelled his grav-pistol at the thing approaching through the flames, but the green beam dissipated, its lethal field shimmering out like a curtain of arctic sky-glow. Somehow it had been turned aside by the strange mantle of ghosts around the clawed giant. The creature laughed once more; and the hatred and contempt in that sound made Sevastus' blood turn sour in his veins.

'Your crude tools cannot harm me, Macraggian,' snarled the heretic, its eyes glowing orange in its fang-snouted helm.

'Perhaps they do not need to,' said Sevastus, turning the beam of his grav-pistol on the bridge itself. The rock, weakened by the questing roots of a thousand tiny plants, shook as if in the grip of a giant; then crumbled away.

Sevastus was already running by the time the bridge collapsed with a rumbling crash. He leapt for the far side, already knowing he would not make it

Calistus leaned out to meet him, letting Aethor fall into Titus' arms and flinging out his other hand to grab Gaiun's outstretched bolter as a

handhold. In that instant, Sevastus saw the flamer operative looming over him with eyes open frighteningly wide, the reflection of the archway's fire dancing as a manic gleam within.

Just as the sergeant's jump was turning into a plummet, he clapped his hand around Calistus' wrist with a clang of ceramite. He was yanked upwards hard as Gaiun and his brothers grabbed their brother around the arm and pulled for all they were worth. Moments later the sergeant was being hoisted onto the ledge; his arm felt like it was being ripped out of its socket, but his power armour's fibre bundles took much of the strain. He got a knee up on the far edge of the fissure, and six strong hands pulled him onto the flagstones beyond it.

'The walker?' he managed.

'Caught in the collapse,' said Gaiun. 'If you ever wish to lend me that pistol, I will not refuse you. It is a work of art.'

'And their leader? The one surrounded by gheists?'

'You took the bridge from under it,' said Titus. 'Its force field could not help against gravity itself. But there will be more. We should keep moving.'

'Dolor?' said Sevastus.

The auspex lit Dolor's face a wan green as he recalibrated. 'Hard to say. This reader is still glitching badly. We should be close to the outer slopes by now, but I would not take any risks.'

'Onwards, then,' said Sevastus. He took a glance back to the fissure behind him, the amber light of flickering flame lighting the clouds of rock dust that had billowed up from the fallen masonry. 'We still have work to do.'

'Brother-sergeant,' said Vanial. 'The collapse. Look.'

A shaft of light was slicing through the wall to the left, rock dust dancing in its rays. Sevastus felt his spirits lift as he realised it was daylight.

'Should we break through?' said Calistus.

'They have our scent already,' said Sevastus. 'We need to maximise what ranged advantage we have, if there are more of these things on our tail. Yes. We break through into the street; Just stick to cover.'

'Aye.'

'Remus,' said Sevastus. 'Make us a way out.'

'Acknowledged,' replied Remus, raising his heavy weapon. 'Dolor, have

you found any weak spots?'

'One moment,' said Dolor, consulting his auspex. 'Middle right, fifteen handspans from the ground, ten from the pillar.'

'Understood. Brace, brothers.'

There was a whoosh from Remus' tubular launcher, followed by a thunderous bang as the krak missile ripped a massive hole in the wall. Garus strode over, mag-clamping his pistol to one leg and his bolter to the other before yanking free a wobbling chunk of masonry as big as his torso. Titus was soon to join him, pulling free yet more chunks of rock until the exit they had forged was large enough for a Space Marine to pass through. Calistus picked up Aethor once more.

'Sorry about dropping you, brother,' he murmured to the comatose form through his respirator mask. 'I know you don't like just lying around.'

'After you, sergeant,' said Garus.

Sevastus nodded, passing through with his chainsword en garde and his pistol, still recharging held atop it. The street he had emerged into was empty, a winding alley at the base of a high cliff leading to a rubble-strewn plaza. A few hundred feet above them he could see the spires of the basilicanum protruding above the fortress wall that formed its lower half.

The brother-sergeant allowed himself a moment of satisfaction as his squad assembled around him, reloading and checking their wounds. They were so nearly there - and aside from Aethor, they were more or less intact.

The ring of a bell chimed in the basilicanum's bell tower, far louder than it should have been in the thin air of the peak

There was a series of loud booms from above. Sevastus caught a glimpse of a horned crimson helm, red eyes glowering over the lip of the cliff.

'Death and damnation,' said Sevastus. 'We've—' The rest of his sentence was stolen as the entire cliff face fell away. With a sound like tectonic plates grinding to dust, a thousand tonnes of rock and mud tumbled down to entomb them all.

PART THREE

THE PEAK

CHAPTER SEVEN

BURIAL

UNDER BLACKCLIFF

Tap, tap.

Tap tap tap.

Brother-Sergeant Jaenos Sevastus opened one eye, the pain in his head flaring as the light of his helm display lanced into his pupil.

Tap tap.

There it was again. That damnable tapping. It was keeping him from slipping into the comforting, all-eclipsing darkness.

Tap, tap. Tap tap tap. Tap tap. Taptap.

'Brothers?'

Sevastus fought to focus through the groggy morass of pain that fogged his mind. He was spredeagled face down, pinned head to toe by countless tonnes of rubble. Every joint, every bone, every synapse burned with a dull pain. But he was still alive.

Tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap.

'I can't move.'

There was no response. His pistol was missing, and with it, a part of his soul. After the narrow victory of Damnos, where he had fought the necrontyr with bolter, blade and even fists when all else had failed, the ancient relic had been a gift from no less a hero than the captain of the Second Company, Cato Sicarius of Talassar. He hated to be without it, its absence an insult on top of a hundred injuries.

His left hand, however, was still locked around the chainsword's grip. He

could not move it, not even to let go. He wriggled the index finger of his right instead, making space in the dirt, until he found a pebble large enough to suit his purposes.

Flexing his digits as best he could, he made some space; assessing the faint sensation of earth trickling down onto the back of his powered gauntlet as he found another stone. He held the first as best he could, and brought it into contact with the stone clutched between little finger and thumb, making a faint tapping noise of his own.

'Can you hear me?'

Tap-tap. Tap.

A muffled silence swallowed his words as profoundly as if he had been in deep space. Aside from the glimmering glow inside his helm, it was pitch black. The runic sigils of his squad mates were half-lit, neither out entirely nor active.

'Brothers?'

Tap-tap. Tap tap tap.

Sevastus tried shifting his vox-channels once more. 'This is Sergeant Sevastus of the Second Company. Can any of you hear me?'

Still nothing.

'Please respond,' said Sevastus. 'I need aid. I am immobile.' He felt a frisson of doubt at the admission he was trapped.

The battleplate of the Adeptus Astartes was so robust in construction, so self-sufficient in its recycling of energy, fluids and raw materials, that the wearer could survive even in the cold vacuum of space. But it could not do so indefinitely.

If the heretics were allowed to consolidate their victory, there was every chance he would starve to death, or die of thirst, before his mud-covered corpse was finally dug out. He faced death by long, slow starvation, a far cry from the explosion of fiery glory in which most Space Marines met their end upon the field of battle.

The thought made Sevastus want to scream.

Tap, tap, tap. Scratch, scratch.

Something in the sound had changed. It seemed sharper, somehow.

'Brothers?'

Something nudged the blade of his hand, pushing against it like the nose

of a questing animal. It was curved, and ridges ran along its length.

He wiggled his fingers a little more, freeing up some space. More earth trickled in, but this time he angled his hand so it spilled over his thumb. Working little by little, he moved his hand to the right, trying to keep his breath even and shallow.

The object was familiar in its bevelled, rounded edge. It was the grip of his pistol.

Tap, tap. Tap tap tap.

Sevastus felt a fierce surge of elation as he got his fingers around the pistol's handle and worked it back and forth until he had established a little give.

Perhaps, just perhaps, the pistol was the key to his escape. The worst thing he could do would be to discharge it upwards, increasing the weight of the rubble that was already close to crushing the life out of him. To discharge it sideways might result in the death of one of his comrades, likely buried in much the same way, and that he would not risk. But firing it downwards...

He worked the pistol some more, gingerly at first. Then, when only trickles of earth fell down instead of crushing tonnage of rock, he tried wrenching it into a new position. It took long agonising minutes, but eventually he got the pistol at a steep downwards angle, his right hand pointing it deeper into his sudden grave.

Sevastus pulled the trigger. The grav-pistol did not respond. It was likely down to the last dregs of its power after collapsing the bridge, and the anger of its machine-spirit would not recharge for hours.

He screwed his eyes shut, fighting the urge to whisper a prayer to the primarch and the Emperor. He alone would get himself out of this, and then he would dig out the rest of his squad, even if he had to slay an army of heretics and use a piece of his own shattered battleplate as a spade.

He squeezed the trigger again. This time, the pistol grew warm in his hand, but did not discharge.

Once more. The relic grew warmer still, on the verge of burning.

Then it discharged with a sigh of energy.

He could feel the ground beneath its muzzle fall away into compact black sediment, its mass increased exponentially. Rocks and mud pelted the back of his gauntlet as the hole began to fill up with earth from above.

A flame of hope alight in his breast, Sevastus moved the pistol and squeezed the trigger again. More movement, more earth coming down from above. He pulled it once more, and jerked himself towards the moving sediment at the same moment with all his strength.

A shuddering mass of earth fell downwards, and he slid half a foot to the right. His fall was arrested by something hard and linear, the obstruction twisting slightly to the left. It was roughly textured, fibrous, and softer than rock. A tree root, as thick as his torso.

Progress.

Tap, tap. Tap tap tap.

'I hear you,' said Sevastus. 'Give me a moment.'

Gripping his chainsword tight, he turned the blade sideways, wiggling it up and down as he fought to bring it laterally across to the tree root. After what felt like an interminable amount of time, he got its serrated teeth in contact with the bark-like texture he was lying against.

Then he squeezed the sword's throttle lever. It strained, whined and protested, but it did not cut.

He yanked it right a little more, dislodging another cascade of earth, and squeezed hard. The teeth screamed into life ripping into the root with such eagerness it pulled his hand forward, chewing a deep gouge. The juddering, violent attack of its blade jolted his arm - a sensation he had grown to relish, even to love. He took a savage joy in fighting the chainsword whenever it went to work, for it was designed to saw ever deeper, its angry gnawing like that of an enraged attack hound with its victim's hand in its jaws. Part of him found the vicious spasm of its bite far more rewarding than the clean slice of a powered blade. It was no finesse weapon, but here, its brute force, determination and singular aggression were exactly what he needed.

With a scream, the chainsword ripped its way through the root and out the other side. Sevastus pulled it back as quick as he could as another cascade of earth and rock tumbled around him, turning its blade at a sharp angle even as his arm was buried, pinned against the obstruction once more.

This time, he could feel the chainsword's teeth already biting into the wood. Its machine-spirit was awake, and hungry.

He closed his eyes, thought of his lost brothers entombed because of his

own faulty leadership, and used that anger to goad the spirit of his chainsword as he squeezed the throttle lever once more. The sword shrieked in rage, its teeth thrashing and juddering as it gnawed once more through the root. Sevastus hung on grimly, the muscles in his arm burning as the sword did everything it could to fight free.

Then, with a sensation of blissful release, the chainsword savaged its way clean through.

Sevastus felt it give; and then had the sensation of falling forward as tonnes of rock thundered down, carrying him with it.

He was now diagonally upside down, his helm pressed at an awkward angle against a cracked slab of stone. This time, however, his pistol was still in his grip.

And better yet, a boulder was right next to him.

Sevastus turned his pistol on the boulder and squeezed the trigger. The grav-beam that shimmered out was so weak it did not even register on his helm display. For a moment, Sevastus feared all he had managed to achieve was an even more ignominious end, eventually dying of starvation upside down instead of lying on his belly.

Then the boulder shuddered as its mass reached a critical point - and shattered the stone slab lying beneath, all along its length.

The world was full of tumbling violence once more as an avalanche of rubble smashed its way downwards. Sevastus was battered from all sides at once, and then - thank the primarch - he was free. He could move his limbs; even though a cascade of silt, rocks and earth was pouring down upon him, he was mobile enough to stumble away from the crashing tumult of earth, and take in his surroundings.

He was back in the crypt network once more. He could see a triangle of twilight high above, and a shelf of rubble and silt still cascading down. Then something bulky and oddly shaped hit him, bowling him over onto his backside.

'Guilliman's wound!' exclaimed Dolor, half standing and staggering backwards to extricate himself from the tumbling earth and rock. He was not alone; more muddy shapes were standing and staggering away from the great mound of earth and rock in the centre of the room. Calistus stood, shaking himself, in the corner. Remus was next, clutching the tube of his missile launcher like a drowning man would clutch a log of

driftwood.

Still the earth and rock tumbled down, the occasional human skeleton falling along with it to land in a scattering of bones. Titus was next to topple through, landing heavily in a pile of roof tiles. Sevastus waded forward into the cascading rock and pulled his brother free before he could be buried once more.

'My thanks, sergeant,' said the older warrior. 'I was concerned we were to meet our end in the darkness.'

'We're a Tactical Squad of the Ultramarines Second Company,' said Sevastus. 'A minor setback like being buried alive isn't going to stop us for long.' He motioned to Remus. 'Do you think you can get your weapon operative sooner rather than later? We need to get the others out.'

The heavy weapons trooper checked over the cylinder of his missile launcher, then sighted down its length. 'It's operative now,' he said. 'Built to Adeptus Astartes tolerances. And unlike your prized pistol, sergeant, this is a simple machine. The missiles do the real work, and I still have a gunrack full of them.' He motioned at the loader arm extending from the left side of his power pack, hanging limp and twisted since the landslide. 'Though I might have to load them the old-fashioned way.'

'Dolor, does your auspex read?'

'Not well,' he admitted. 'What did you have in mind?'

'Is there another vulnerable point in the street above? Somewhere thin enough for a krak missile to bring the rest of this landslide down into the crypts?'

The auspex specialist tilted his head left to right. 'There will be - I don't need the auspex to tell you that.' He scanned the ceiling. 'Up there, by the cluster of brown-yellow roots. The structural integrity will have been undermined massively by the trees' spread. It'll come down easily enough with a bit of encouragement.'

'Will a krak missile do it?'

'We'll need more than one,' said Dolor. 'Four or five at least, to bring that down.'

'I only have one krak left,' admitted Remus. 'Plenty of frag missiles, but...'

'But frag doesn't have nearly the right yield,' said Dolor.

'Then we have a problem,' sighed Sevastus.

'Perhaps I can help, brothers. If you can help me first.'

Sevastus turned, only half recognising the sonorous bass voice coming from somewhere at the back of the chamber. He walked fast around the perimeter of the rubble mound, limping a little as his knee - twisted in the fall - cracked back into place. Half buried on the far side of the landslide was a massively built Space Marine, his head and right arm the only part of him that was not covered in mud and shattered detritus.

'Toriad of Squad Thassarius at your service,' said the hulking warrior, slurring his words a little as if waking from a daze. 'In a manner of speaking.'

'Remus, Calistus,' said Sevastus, motioning to his nearest squad mates. 'Help me move these boulders and free Brother Toriad from his prison. Likely he has languished there far too long.'

'I had given up hope of getting back out after they buried our entire vanguard,' admitted the warrior. 'I entered a hibernatory state by triggering my sus-an membrane. Likely the others of my squad have done the same, if they survived.'

Together the three of Sevastus' squad wrenched, slid and hurled enough rock away from Toriad that he was able to stand once more, hopping as he pulled his leg free. He reached deep into the earth and yanked out a huge, bulky heavy bolter from the pile of detritus in which he had been buried. 'I have plenty of bolts left. Yet I must clean this beauty first, and appease its machine-spirit.' He set to scraping as much mud and rock from his heavy weapon as he could, cleaning it fastidiously even though his own battleplate was still caked in filth.

'Who...?' managed Titus as he rounded the rubble peak.

'Danatos Toriad,' said the giant. 'The captain's still buried up there. And Promethor.'

'You were buried in a landslide too?'

'They have the whole cliff face mined, I believe. These are renegades. They don't fight fair, and they're cunning enough to use our own doctrine against us.'

'We know that well enough,' said Titus. 'It's a blessing we found you, Toriad. Well met. This is... This changes things.'

'Are you sure a heavy bolter has enough yield to take the ceiling down?' asked Sevastus.

Toriad shrugged. 'Let's find out.' He stood with one foot on a boulder, hammered the last of the earth out of his heavy weapon's barrel with a clenched fist, and raised the boxy cannon to the ceiling.

'Come on, old friend,' he said, barely audible. 'It was just a bit of mud.'

The heavy bolter gave a great chugging roar, blasting a column of fire from all four of the cardinal points of its muzzle as it sent a stream of bolts hurtling towards the ceiling. They detonated amongst the tree roots above with such an ear-shattering volume that Sevastus' audio dampeners kicked in.

Earth and rock showered everywhere as the tree was chewed apart from the bottom up, arm-thick pieces of root flying in all directions. Thunder filled the chamber, shaking every rock and spur of bone. Clumps of earth toppled down - at first they were no bigger than a fist, but as the detonations smashed and blasted the rocky substrate, pieces of ceiling the size of boulders fell down amongst them. Sevastus saw Titus leap back to avoid being struck, and felt fragments of rock ping from the mud-covered plates of his power armour.

Then, with an ominous creak, the tree whose roots had quested under the street gave up the fight and toppled to one side.

The rain of rocks and earth became another deluge as the entire street gave way under the weight of the landslide trap. The Space Marines clambered up the hillock of earth as it mounded up around them, diving in to pull at the limbs of the squad mates that came tumbling free amongst the collapse.

One by one the rest of Squad Sevastus was pulled to safety - the more that were freed, the easier it became. A rune winked into full status on the sergeant's visor display; the noise of rumbling rock and cries of relief had slowly brought Aethor back to his senses. The knifeman groaned as he propped himself up against a pillar.

'Punched by a Dreadnought,' said Sevastus approvingly. 'But still with us.'

'Barely,' managed Aethor. 'I will be well, in time.'

Within a matter of minutes the whole squad stood at the edges of the artificial hillock they had created, checking over their wargear and clapping each other on the pauldron as they exchanged words of gratitude.

And they were not alone. Last to emerge from the mound of earth was a figure in a ragged cloak and a dented, discoloured crest, recognisable by

silhouette if not by markings.

Brother-Captain Thassarius.

Toriad grabbed his outstretched hand and helped him upright. Just as it had for the rest of them, the proud cobalt of the officer's armour had been obscured from head to toe.

'Welcome back to the land of the living, captain,' Toriad said.

'My thanks, Danatos,' he said quietly, turning to look around the cavernous undercrypt. 'It appears I owe thanks to several others, too. Squad... Sevastus? Forgive me, it is hard to tell.'

'Well met,' said Sevastus, stepping up the hillock of fallen debris and earth to clasp Thassarius' wrist in the warrior's grip. Earth and pieces of grit ground on ceramite as the captain returned the handshake.

'A devious trap of theirs, and effective,' said the brother captain. 'After the slaughter on the mud flats, this has not been a glorious assault.'

'It has not,' said Promethor, cleaning black earth from the heat coils of his plasma gun.

Thassarius shook his head, looking down at his feet. 'Perhaps you would be more suited to the captaincy than I, Brother-Sergeant Sevastus.'

Sevastus felt suddenly uncomfortable. 'I am just glad to be free of that crushing rock, and to have my squad bolstered by no less a presence than the company captain.'

Thassarius waved the compliment away. 'This is your mission. I will follow your lead.'

'Acknowledged,' said Sevastus, thumping his fist on the aquila of his chest-plate. He turned to his squad, loosely assembled in the gloom. 'My thanks to whoever was tapping, there, in the darkness. It gave me... direction.'

He looked from one to the other, but his brothers were silent on the matter, and nothing was forthcoming on his visor display.

'Tapping, sergeant?' said Dolor.

'Yes.' He looked to the newcomers. 'My thanks, then, to you.'

'It was not I,' said Thassarius.

'Nor I,' said Toriad. 'I could barely move a muscle in there.' Promethor looked up from picking dirt out of his plasma gun, cocked his head, and shrugged. 'No, brother-sergeant.'

'So none of you were tapping?'

Silence.

'Well, thanks at least to whoever pushed my grav-pistol towards my grip, then. It made a critical difference. That was the stone that started the avalanche, if you will forgive the expression.'

Sevastus' brothers were still regarding him with blank expressions. He looked down in confusion for a moment, and saw one of the age-browned skeletons that had fallen amongst the rock. It was staring up at him with empty sockets, its rictus grin seeming to mock him from the darkness.

'Strange,' he said, shaking his head. Those who had suffered concussion could imagine things, even hallucinate, he told himself. There had been plenty of impact in the rockslide. 'No matter. Let's get topside.'

'I would venture we are not yet fit for battle, sergeant,' said Garus, taking off his dented helm and wiping away the clotted blood that had slicked the side of his head and his right eye socket. 'We are covered head to toe in mud, our heraldic colours shamed, and the war spirits of our armour greatly offended. Worse still, many of us are out of ammunition.'

'This much is true,' said Sevastus. 'But we have little choice.'

'There is a site nearby,' said Thassarius. 'A plaza, with many fallen brothers. Some were physically torn apart by a metal monstrosity that our enemy, Lord Thursk, considers his pet. Though it seems ill to me, we must avail ourselves of our fallen brothers' wargear. Take their bolt clips, their flamer canisters, even parts of their battleplate if necessary. We will not conquer the basilicanum without resupply.'

'Do any of them happen to have a melta gun?' asked Aethor. 'I'm not keen on duelling another Dreadnought with a knife.'

'Sadly not,' said Promethor. 'But we have this.' He powered up his plasma gun, its energy coils glowing in the darkness. 'It might be enough.'

'Is there no other way to resupply?' said Gaiun. 'Picking over the remains of our bothers...' He let the implied rebuke hang in the air.

'It is not unheard of to requisition with respect,' said Titus uneasily. 'Though none savour such an act.'

'We have little choice,' said Sevastus. 'If we want to conquer this peak, and give the Apothecarium a chance to reclaim the progenoid glands *of* the fallen, we must use everything at your disposal. The gene-seed they contain is vital to the survival of the Chapter, and the forging of new recruits. That is reason enough. Let us do it.'

'And as for our armour?' said Titus. 'Should we not at least show our insignia, so any reinforcements can tell friend from foe?'

Sevastus met Thassarius' gaze, and felt an unspoken accord between them.

'Leave it be,' said Sevastus.

Promethor cocked his head. 'Captain? Will that not invite ill fortune, and lead to malfunction?'

'We did not send our Tenth Company on this mission with good reason,' explained Thassarius. 'In a recon mission against several hundred traitors, a small team of scouts would have proved outmatched, even with their cameleoline cloaks to conceal them. Our mistake was thinking to overpower the foe with the same tactics we would employ against a conventional force. This was no ordinary enemy. Here we face renegade Space Marines, and they know our doctrine well.'

Aethor spat on the ground in disgust. 'History rot them all.'

'They were looking for the colours of Macragge,' said Thassarius, 'and wherever they found them, we came under such heavy attack our strengths were turned to weaknesses. We thought ourselves unstoppable, and met a wall of adamantium. No, Brother Promethor. We stay clad in dirt, for now. Think of it as atonement for being discovered.'

'It is the only way I can see that we will make the climb to the top without being greeted with gunfire every step of the way,' said Sevastus. 'Let their own traps work against them for once.'

There were murmurs of assent, though neither Titus nor Promethor looked convinced.

'Let us hunt,' said Sevastus, 'and baptise ourselves in blood.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE CLIMB

BLACKCLIFF PLAZA

Aethor looked up at the high cliff as his brothers gathered the last ammo clips they needed from their fallen brothers. The mosaic-floored plaza had been slicked with gore and viscera, the strewn remains of Adeptus Astartes warriors and their heretical equivalents scattered like litter in the streets. Yet it was the climb ahead of them that made Aethor feel vaguely uneasy.

He had volunteered immediately, of course. It would not do to show weakness, and now he was back on his feet, the best thing to do was to attack the situation head on. This next leg of the journey, however, would not be easily traversed.

The climb was over three hundred feet straight up, with no shelter, and no way to defend himself if it came to it. All it would take was a sentry to spot his ascent, and a hail of explosive bolts would tear him from the cliff face with contemptuous ease.

Nothing else to be done, thought Aethor, but to go onwards.

He sent the signal rune for patience to his squad, extending its loop to reach Squad Thassarius. 'Just give it a minute or two, brothers,' he said. 'If the pesciners' village was any indication of the rhythms of this place, the renegades will soon ring out a distraction for us.'

Sure enough, within minutes the awful toll of the basilicanum bell rang out from high above. At the first toll, Aethor moved to the shadowed edge of the plaza and kicked a foothold at waist height before its echoes had faded. The crunch and tinkle of shattered wall tiles was drowned out

completely by the knell of the campanile high above.

He reached high, making a claw of his hand, and when the next toll struck, ripped out a tile as well as a chunk of earth and rock. Placing his right foot in the first hole and his left hand in the second, he boosted upwards, pulling in close before kicking another hole in the wall as the third toll sounded out.

Up the knifeman went, taking his time, making sure that every shattered tile hit the ground as the bell above rang loud. By the time the sound faded away, Aethor had made enough handholds to make the climb up to the bare stone wall above the decorations of the plaza. The muscles in his arms throbbed slightly at the effort, and his head felt ready to split, but with the fibre bundles of his power armour compensating and his tactic of locking his battleplate's joints whenever he found a safe place to wait, the climb still seemed feasible.

Hand over hand, Aethor made his way further and further up the cliff face. He spared a glance downwards to the rest of his unit; they were waiting patiently.

'Dolor?' he transmitted over a closed channel. 'Is my course still true?'

'It is, brother.' Dolor sent an overlay to his helm unit. By the auspex reading, his quarry was near enough directly above them, *'you make good progress.'*

Punch, kick, grab, pull, rise. Over and over again Aethor made the same pattern of motions, always keeping three points of contact, always scanning ahead to find new solutions to the dilemmas the rugged cliff posed to him. But his head was still pounding from being knocked unconscious in the crypt, and now and again his vision blurred in a swimming morass of pain. Every so often a handhold would give under his grip, each unwelcome shock giving a frisson of adrenaline.

With a great effort, he reached a natural lip of rock that gave him a strong basis for the next phase of the climb. He scanned for a new route, then made progress once more.

Two-thirds of the way up, he planted his right boot in what he thought to be a stable foothold, only for it to give way. His handhold crumbled a moment later as he doubled the weight upon it. He was half falling from the cliff face before he could properly catch himself.

No choice but to leap.

Aethor put all his weight on his left foot and boosted upwards for the next handhold, a heart-pounding gamble as he reached for a new outcrop of rock. He caught it, and hung by one hand over the sheer drop. He could feel the wind off the sea nudging him, pushing at his dangling body as if toying with the idea of hurling him to the rockcrete far below.

With a groan of effort, he pulled himself up, wedged his other hand into a fissure and made a fist. Locked in place, it was enough for him to find a foothold and start the climb anew.

The higher Aethor got, the more he saw evidence of the long, dangling roots of the ironwood trees that formed the ornamental gardens high above. They looked strong enough, providing decent solutions to the ongoing riddle of the optimum ascent. But he did not trust them, not at all. They were the easy route.

As they had learned a number of times since their planetfall upon Beati Sedna, the obvious solution was sometimes a trap.

Aethor put a foot into a large hollow that held the nest of a seabird, reasoning it would be solid enough. A mass of four-winged shoregulls burst from the cliff face, their squawking, barking cries startling in the silence.

'Aethor,' came Dolor's voice over the helm relay. *'Pull in close and stay completely still.'*

The knifeman pressed himself flat against the cliff face, the side of his helm pressed into the broken straw of a shoregull's nest. A baby bird shrieked in its egg, its bulbous pink eyes blind as it reached its scrawny, bald head high. One of its distended orbs opened to reveal a pupil slitted diagonally, the irregular bulges in its line reminiscent of something that put Aethor's mind on edge all the more.

The thing's pupil echoed the shape of the Great Rift, that immense warp storm that had riven the galaxy in twain. The realisation made him feel vaguely nauseous. He hissed through his helm's grille to intimidate the infant gull into silence, but the creature just shrieked all the more, its stiletto beak open wide. Black blood drooled down either side of its neck as it screamed, the sound disturbingly human.

Aethor longed with every iota of his being to take his knife from its sheath and impale the thing, but he contented himself with staring daggers at it instead. He fought to hang on as the wind tugged hard at him, doing

his best to remain motionless.

'Sentry on scope,' said Dolor over the helm-vox. *'Renegade. Keep stock still and brace. He's looking down the cliff edge in your direction.'*

With a caw, a sea eagle with long black eye-crests dived low into Aethor's peripheral vision. It snatched one of the cawing shoregulls from the air with a predator's grace, then flapped its mighty pinions hard, arcing out of Aethor's vision as it headed back up to its eyrie.

He waited, his posture awkward to the point of agony, but dared not move a muscle.

At last, Dolor spoke again. *'No more readings. He's moved on.'* Aethor relaxed with a sigh, letting other muscle groups take the strain and unlocking the joints of his battleplate with a mental impulse. Lactic acid burned in his muscles, but he put the pain out of his mind.

'That was too close,' he said. 'Am I clear for the rest of the ascent?'

'You are for now,' said Dolor. *'Make haste.'*

Resuming his climb, Aethor made decent progress, using the jutting roots to cover his approach where he could but not putting his weight on them. After another gruelling five minutes, he came to the top of the cliff, reaching up and over as far as he could to sink his fingers into the pebbly earth. He pulled his torso up, using it as a fulcrum to get a knee over the lip of the cliff.

It was not a graceful finish to his climb by any means, but he had made it to the top. Bent double to keep his profile small, he moved into the shadow of some green-grey trees - ironoaks, by his reckoning - and took his knife from its scabbard.

He lanced the tip in between two thick plates of bark, and yellowish fluids seeped out. Poisoned, then, and treacherous.

The roots would have eventually given way if he had trusted his weight to them, likely dropping him to his death. He put his weight against the tree, testing it with all his strength, but despite the rot inside the trunk the tree was so old and stubborn it did not budge an inch.

Good enough.

'Aethor,' came Dolor's voice over the internal vox. *'The sentry. He's looping back.'*

'Acknowledged.' Aethor pressed his back to the ironoak tree, triggering his audio pickups to maximum and listening intently. There it was: the

rustle-thud of power armoured footsteps crushing blades of dried grass before planting heavy bootprints into the earth. Twenty strides away perhaps. Now fifteen.

The Ultramarine did his best to focus, to find a point of calm despite the ache of his limbs and the dull throb in his mind. To raise the alarm now would be to damn the entire expedition to failure, and this was no mutant sentry he faced. This was a renegade Space Marine, clad head to toe in battleplate. There was no way he would be taken down without some manner of noise. The bell would not sound again for nearly two hours, by his reckoning. This close to the cliff, a sudden attack could result in him being shot on sight and pitched to his death.

Aethor looked up at the skies, seeking inspiration. He was about to give up when he saw a nest of twigs, fish skeletons and browned human finger bones in the branches some fifteen feet above him.

Taking a deep breath, he leapt straight up, embedding his knife as hard as he could in a knot of wood with a soft thunk. He pulled himself up high, and riding the momentum, he tipped the bird's nest with the tips of his fingers.

A pair of sky-blue eggs tumbled out. He caught them deftly with his offhand, lowering himself to the precipice with the other before working free his knife and placing the bird's eggs carefully on the ground in between the roots.

The upper branches erupted with a frantic squawking as a pair of shoregulls burst from concealment, flapping high into the sky and wheeling around the tree.

Please, thought Aethor. Please let this work.

He heard the distinctive crack of a bolter firing, then a deafening bang. An explosion of feathers appeared on Aethor's peripheral vision.

'Just target practice,' said the sentry over the vox, his voice tinny and quiet yet still registering to Aethor's auto-senses. 'That thrice-cursed eagle is spooking the gulls. I find it hard to believe no one has killed it yet.'

The sentry paused, and there was the crunch of footfalls, getting closer. Too close.

'Understood,' he said. 'I'll double check. Tell Thursk he can go back to his monster.'

Aethor leaned around the tree and shot the sentry in the head.

The horned traitor's red helm snapped back as the bolt exploded on contact. Incredibly, the ceramite held, but Aethor's knife was following close behind it. Its hypersteel tip lanced through the seal that connected helm to gorget; it sank to the hilt, embedded in the heretic's brain.

As he fell to the ground, limbs thrashing, Aethor darted forward and grabbed his body, lifting it in a crouch. With any luck the renegade's fellows would assume the second shot was sent after the same avian targets as the first.

To roll the body off the cliff could draw attention, the sound of its impact below alerting another sentry and perhaps even drawing their gaze to the rest of the squad. Instead, he hauled it behind the tree by the leg, gritting his teeth as he hoisted it high and wedged its foot between two stout branches. It dangled upside down, hidden from sight, as he pulled his knife free.

'Target neutralised,' he voxed to Dolor. 'I'm moving on the objective.'

Ahead, scattered across a half-height maze of privet, were the bodies of five dead Ultramarines. They were Reivers, part of the new Primaris delegation that had been attached to their battle group during the Indomitus Crusade. For all their capability, for all their strength, they too had been gunned down by the renegades awaiting their attack.

There, amongst their scattered wargear, was the dull black tube of a grapnel launcher. Aethor felt relief flow through his chest like cool med-salve over an inflamed burn wound. He looked over his surroundings, pleased to see nothing moving other than the aerial duel of the hungry sea eagle and the other gull startled from the tree. Glad of the distraction, he darted across to the fallen Reivers.

Even in repose they seemed formidable. The Primaris Marines were larger than Aethor and his kin, with skull-like masks covering the bottom halves of their faces. They were all dead, that much was obvious; their Mark X armour was holed by craters so large he could have fitted his head inside with room to spare. Clearly Toriad was not the only one with a heavy bolter on the island. So close to their quarry, these battle-brothers had been spotted as they made the final assault, and mercilessly gunned down.

'Your deaths were not futile, brothers,' whispered Aethor. 'We will reclaim your gene-seed in time.'

Only then did he realise the lie in his words.

Some of the gaping holes in the fallen Reivers were at their necks - made not by explosive bolts, but by gouging knives. No, he thought, looking again at the serried gouges at the base of each of their throats; they had been made by claws. Their progenoid glands were missing, likely scooped out and devoured by the mutant monstrosities they had faced in the crypts.

Aethor's wince turned into a snarl of anger as he thought of the heretics making free with the Chapter's most precious resource. He forced himself to focus. They would pay soon enough.

Moving low, Aethor picked up the grapnel launcher and darted over to the shelter of the trees. After a few moments of turning it this way and that, he held down the release stud that freed its hypercarbon tensile cable.

He unspooled a few dozen feet and returned to the large ironoaks near the lip of the cliff, sliding around so the trunk of the largest tree was interposed between him and the battlements high above. Barely an inch of cliff edge separated the back of his boot from nothingness; pebbles fell away as the earth gave a little beneath his weight.

Aethor ignored it. He sent the grapnel's hypersteel harpoon around the tree with a looping throw, then wrapped it around itself and latched the release stud open.

'Sergeant Sevastus,' he voxed. 'Solution incoming.'

'Acknowledged.'

Aethor let go of the bulky grapnel launcher, and it dropped like a stone to the plaza below.

A breathless moment passed as the thing spun end over end down the cliff, disappearing from sight.

'Caught and received,' said Sevastus. *'A good find, Brother Aethor. This is the latch-rune on the side, I presume.'*

'It is,' Aethor replied. 'It is secure. Just release it, and hang on tight.'

A moment later, there was a soft whirr as the grapnel launcher recoiled, the tension in the sound letting Aethor know it was bringing one of his brothers with it. He saw not Sevastus, but Garus making the edge of the cliff a moment later. His pose was that of an abseiler as the launcher hauled him up. The marksman landed well, turning with a smooth motion to put his back to one of the ironwood trees.

The Ultramarine checked his bolter and bolt pistol, and turned to Aethor,

nodding in approval. 'Back on form, brother,' he said.

Aethor inclined his head in thanks.

Titus was next, then Gaiun. One by one the squads made the lip of the cliff, darted over to the privet maze whilst unclamping their weapons, and took battle readiness, Captain Thassarius was last, to Aethor's surprise, but he did not question it for long. The ability to adapt and learn was one of the skills that kept the Ultramarines first amongst equals in the hallowed ranks of the Adeptus Astartes.

Together the two squads moved forward, bent low amongst the maze as they approached the next line of ornamental trees and the outer walls of the basilicanum beyond them.

Thassarius approached Aethor as he forged ahead, scanning the surroundings for more sentries. 'Excellent stealth work,' said the captain. 'I see the knife is sometimes deadlier than the sword. You have true talent.'

'I am an Ultramarine of the Second Company,' said Aethor. He shrugged, but inside he felt a warm glow of satisfaction. 'Now let us find some abominations to kill.'

CHAPTER NINE

THE LAST TEST

BASILICANUM OF ST CAPILENE

'Incoming volley!' shouted Brother-Sergeant Sevastus. He ducked low amongst the debris of shattered statues, stealing a glance across the rubble-strewn plaza as a thunderous salvo of fire roared overhead. Their stealth assault had got them in position, but with thirteen Adeptus Astartes moving in, it was doomed to failure.

The cry had gone up sooner than Sevastus would have liked, but the die was cast. Around him, his men were emerging from the well-manicured trees of the ornamental gardens. They were preparing for the final assault upon the basilicanum, reloading their guns and repeating mantras of battle as they came.

The air smelt of cordite and rock dust. It would not be long before it was laced with the tang of spilt blood.

'Seventeen vital signs, one walker,' said Brother Dolor over the vox, his auspex chiming. 'This will not be easy.'

Sevastus revved his chainsword, sharing a glance with Thassarius. The captain's expression was grave as he gave a solemn nod. 'At them!' shouted Sevastus. 'For the God-Emperor, charge! Courage and honour!'

Sevastus burst from cover and hurdled the rubble, clearing it easily. His brothers were close behind him, their voices raised in a joyous roar. Thassarius was already a few steps ahead, pounding forward with his power sword drawn and plasma pistol glowing bright. Castor and Titus emerged from concealment on either flank, bolters booming as they

stitched their shots through the fascia of the ruined cathedral ahead.

Sevastus saw glimpses of blood-coloured armour in the shadows as the heretics of the Crimson Slaughter were caught in the crossfire. Three were blasted from their hiding places; another was taken in the head by a pinpoint shot from Castor. Then Brother Toriad's heavy bolter gave voice to its deep, chugging roar, and the entire rockcrete wall was torn into rubble by a storm of explosive bolts.

Promethor was quick to capitalise, his plasma gun whining to full charge before releasing a ball of burning energies as bright as the Ovar sun. It struck a slinking heretic full in the chest, blasting his torso apart in a cloud of red steam.

The sudden hurricane of heavy firepower bought time for Thassarius to close the distance at full sprint. Sevastus smiled grimly as the brother-captain hit a knot of heretics like a charging bull, smashing two to the ground. The captain's power sword decapitated a third, a horned helm flying away in an arc of sizzling blood.

The sergeant's dual hearts skipped as he saw a colossal Helbrute bearing down on Thassarius, the metal beast a fusion of once-mighty warrior and infernal machine.

'Captain! Beware!'

'I have it.' Thassarius turned quickly and loosed a sphere of killing fire from his plasma pistol. The Helbrute roared in pain as the blast incinerated half its head. Thassarius was already rushing past as it swung wildly with its giant fist, the blow too slow to connect.

Sevastus took three long strides and leapt, vaulting from a fallen pillar to drive his chainsword into the molten mass that had been the Helbrute's face. The blade jerked and juddered as its adamantium teeth tore bone to splinters. As the Dreadnought raised its foot to stamp him flat, Sevastus shoulder-barged it in the hip, knocking it off balance.

One of Brother Remus' missiles hit home, the timing perfect. The shot toppled the bestial walker with an explosion so violent that Sevastus' ears rang even inside his helm. Gritting his teeth, the sergeant levelled a shot from his recharged grav-pistol. This time, his target could not wade away from the beam; the giant's metal frame crumpled as it was flattened by its own mass.

Sevastus looked up to see a squad of traitors in striking range, jagged

knives drawn and bolt pistols bright with muzzle flashes. A shot punched into the sergeant's shoulder, its impact hard enough to rock him backwards. Much of its force was absorbed by his pauldron, and the dull flare of pain was quickly muted by a burst of stimulants from his enhanced physiology.

Ahead, a bolt struck Thassarius hard, sending him crashing through a partially ruined balustrade. Sevastus saw the first of the heretic gunners fly sideways; Brother Garus was storming through the dust clouds, levelling a one-man fusillade with bolter and pistol alike.

Gaiun was close behind, bolter held close to his chest as he fired on the run. His first two shots bullseyed a traitor as he was priming a grenade. The cylinder fell from the heretic's nerveless fingers, rolling away before detonating amongst his fellows - but they had turned their armoured shoulders into the blast and came on nonetheless.

Sevastus growled as he charged the nearest enemy, chainsword carving around in a classic Macraggian sweep. The fiend was unnaturally fast and leaned away from the blow before punching his combat knife into Sevastus' armpit. It sank through the flexible armour joint and into his flesh, its tip sending a spike of agony into his chest. The sergeant felt a jarring impact inside him as the knife glanced off his reinforced ribcage - but for the Emperor's grace, it would have found his primary heart.

There was a blur of cobalt-blue armour and Aethor was there, his combat knife lashing out to take the traitor's hand from his wrist. Sevastus elbowed the renegade in the jaw, driving him back and buying a moment's reprieve. Aethor feinted left, then reversed his thrust to stab the heretic in the eye socket just as Sevastus batted aside another traitor's blade with his grav-pistol.

Out of nowhere, he was punched hard in the neck, stumbling sidelong from the melee before recovering. He could taste blood on his lips with each breath. Worse still, there were six more foes closing in, howling in bloodlust like wolves hungry for the kill.

The air filled with a backwash of heat and choking fumes as Calistus came striding out from behind a statue, his flamer gouting a column of fire. The conflagration blossomed wide, consuming the heretics entirely and sending two of their number flailing away to roll in the dust.

Brother Vanial was close on his brother's heels, priming a frag grenade

before hurling it into the flames. There was a dull *tink* of impact as it bounced into the traitors' midst; blinded by the flames, they did not brace for impact. Sevastus turned on instinct as the frag detonation hurled renegades left and right, severed limbs spinning through the choking fug of battle.

There were still more glimpses of crimson in the ruins beyond, but as Sevastus watched, they receded into the smoke.

Already Sevastus could feel his blood clotting around his wounded shoulder, the pain ebbing away under a rush of pure adrenaline. He grinned and hefted his chainsword once more.

'Sergeant?' said Titus. 'Should we follow?'

'Aye, but carefully.' He motioned his squad forward, sharing a nod with Captain Thassarius. 'The Sanctum Sanctorum is but a spear's throw away. If we can make it to the central altar, we take a defensive stance as we did in the catacombs. The daemon-possessed heretics found it hard to approach the tomb of a minor saint, so the holy aura of Saint Capilene herself will likely do a deal of the work for us.'

'Very good,' said Titus, a look of consternation clouding his features. 'We just have to get there first.'

Dostoyev heard a series of thunderous booms and sharp bangs echoing in the middle distance. He felt his mind swim through the murk, then saw lights dancing in front of his eyes. Slowly, consciousness returned to him, and then the memory of what had happened only a few hours ago as he took in the dark stone walls around him. Events layered themselves one atop another to fill a dull void of uncertainty.

Betrayal, sudden and callous.

The tanker struggled to stand in the cold, dark cell, but he fell back almost immediately. He was bound hand and foot with a heavy rope, that much was obvious from the gnawing lines of pain that ravaged his wrists. Somehow he had ended up inside a dank cell, thick with the smell of chalky underground rock mingled with the tang of human refuse. The ammoniac stink woke him up the rest of the way, causing his eyes to sting as a surge of nausea threatened to spill the meagre contents of his stomach.

'Where in the...'

Someone was coming down the stairs, and fast. Not the clumping thud of ceramite boots, thank the Emperor, but the footsteps of a man in a hurry. He recognised the boots as they came into view, and the fatigues worn through at the knee.

'Zettran, you traitorous bastard,' he snarled. Even speaking made his head hurt, but he had hate enough to push the words through it. 'You're dead.'

'Not yet,' said the driver. He came into full view, a lumin strapped to his vox-unit with a pair of lasguns crossed behind it. His uniform was torn off at both shoulders, and an eight-pointed star was painted in blood over the white of his flak armour. Dostoyev was almost certain it was the blood from the split in the back of his head, but the disgust he felt paled into insignificance next to the revulsion triggered by Zettran's arms.

One was red and shiny, covered in a vicious rash. The other had what could only be described as a maw in the elbow joint, a lolling tongue curling from it as if tasting the air.

'I know,' said Zettran. 'It's not pretty. And before you ask, I had no choice but to knock you out and carry you here.' He knocked on his vox-unit. 'Luckily I am used to carrying heavy great lumps of baggage for miles at a time.'

'Where the hell are we?' asked Dostoyev.

'In the basilicanum. Alive and well. Well, alive.'

'You used me to get in here,' said Dostoyev. 'Used me as a bargaining chip. A human sacrifice.'

'A sign of loyalty,' said Zettran. 'Turns out they are quite used to working with local sympathisers. Especially ones who...' He grimaced. 'Who wear their hearts on their sleeves.'

'Then may the Emperor burn your soul for all eternity.'

'It's burning pretty hot already. Hot enough to melt the Truskan Poles. This was the only way forward, old friend.'

'You're no friend of mine, mutant scum.'

'Perhaps you would be the mutant, if the bell had chosen you instead.'

'You will die with a bolt-round spattering your brains. Just wait.'

'Have it your way,' said Zettran with a shrug, drawing a knife and stepping over to Dostoyev. The gunner recoiled, eyes wide as the blade came for him. Then, when the evil tongue in his ex-comrade's elbow stretched out to lick at his face, Dostoyev started to scream.

Sevastus stepped into the mosaic-floored colonnade, grav-pistol held out and chainsword ready. Aside from a faint chanting in the distance, the place was quiet, though it was far from tranquil.

The essence of serenity that had rested within the basilicanum for centuries had been replaced by a lingering feeling of malice, a cloying threat as of a hundred unseen eyes gazing down at once. Sevastus' half-formed plan was to make a stand at the altar, where the concentration of Imperial faith from the basilicanum's worshippers would be thickest. He had expected to have to fight every step of the way, but thus far they had advanced without sighting a single enemy. In his opinion, their advance had been far too easy, the precursor to another trap. He very much doubted they would simply walk up to it and take position before the ambush was sprung.

Ahead were Titus and Garus, their bolters held at shoulder height as they scanned for signs of the enemy. They moved carefully, pillar to pillar, and then waved their brothers forward. Sevastus did not need their vox reports to know they had still not found any signs of life; he could tell by their body language. The central nave was completely empty.

As the sergeant moved further into the nave, his eyes took in every detail, memorising the angles and offshoots of each chapel and mausoleum. The flagstones underfoot were dotted with plain green-grey slabs, each engraved with the name of one of the Imperium's faithful. Most of them had been scratched out, defaced or emblazoned with an eight-pointed star. Where a carving or bas-relief of an Imperial saint could be made out, the face had been scratched away by some sharp blade or talon. Some were smeared with blood and excrement, the earthy scents mingling with the complex tang of sanctific incense.

'It's way too quiet,' said Gaiun. 'Especially given the amount of noise we made on the way in.'

'Dolor?' said Sevastus.

'Nothing to contribute. There's so much contralogical interference in here I can't even make you out, let alone any hostiles.'

'Sergeant,' said Titus. 'You are going to want to see this.'

Sevastus stepped forward to Titus' side, peering through the tall Corinthian columns into the heart of the Sanctum Sanctorum. There, squatting like a graven idol over an altar piled with skulls, was a

monstrous war machine. Wan moonlight streamed in from the gaping breach in the semi-circular wall behind it, glinting from the ornate armour and spiked plates that covered its many-legged form. It seemed to shift, swelling and shrinking as if breathing evenly at rest.

'Captain,' said Sevastus, turning to Thassarius. 'We need your insight. What is our best move?'

'I have seen this thing in battle,' said the captain. 'It is extremely lethal at close quarters.'

'That cannon on its hull,' said Dolor. 'It looks close to Demolisher calibre.'

'That is why I will buy Brothers Promethor and Toriad the time they need to level a killing shot,' said the captain. 'We will see how impervious it is to a powered blade.'

'I'm with you,' said Aethor. Sevastus winced, expecting a rebuff from the captain; a knife against a daemon engine was not a fortuitous match.

'Excellent,' said Thassarius. 'Brothers Titus, Gaiun, Remus - cover us, if you would. Sergeant Sevastus, if you would be so kind as to kill the bastard at the heart of this, I would be much obliged.'

'Aye, sir,' he said. You heard him, Ultramarines. Courage and honour.'

A moment later, Thassarius led the charge from the colonnade, the daemon engine stirred from its slumber, and the basilicanum echoed to the bone-shaking din of war.

'Stop being such a mewling summerkind,' hissed Zettran, cutting away at the rope that bound Dostoyev's wrists. 'Can't you hear that gunfire out there? It's now or never.'

He watched Dostoyev struggle on for a moment, then stop as he realised Zettran was cutting him free with quick sawing motions.

'You can thank me later,' said Zettran. 'This was the only way we were ever going to get in here. You really think two Guardsmen could storm a fortified renegade stronghold?'

'You're dead either way.'

'Perhaps,' he replied. 'Even in the wake of ten Space Marines, we couldn't have got close. You should thank me.' Zettran shook his head, and itched absently at the red rash on his other arm. He felt skin split, like that of a three-day old corpse in the sun, and fought down a surge of horror. 'It was

never going to happen,' he continued. 'Just be glad I got to you before one opened your belly. Or they fed you to the beast.'

Dostoyev cast a baleful look up at him, but said nothing. His comrade shrugged off the coils of rope from his arms, lowering and flexing them to let the blood flow back into his hands.

'Looks like they burned,' said Zettran. 'But at least you're still human.'

Dostoyev spat on the floor, looking up at him in contempt. He kicked off the rope coils from his feet, grimacing as his circulation pushed through constricted veins.

'What now, then? I'm free to go? It's a one-way trip for you, Zettran. That much is certain.'

'Maybe. Let's go. Lord Thursk is out there. We can still make him pay for what he did here.'

Zettran held out Dostoyev's lasgun stock first. The gunner flexed his legs, shaking the life back into them, and ripped the rifle from Zettran's grip.

'I should clean this thing with counterseptice,' he said.

'Probably. I doubt you'll live long enough for infection to be a problem.'

'Fair point,' said Dostoyev, shouldering past and trudging up the stairs. 'Let's go.'

Zettran followed him.

Stab him in the spine and get it over with.

'No,' murmured Zettran, his eyes settling on a bas-relief of a twin-headed eagle. 'I will not.'

'Will not what?' asked Dostoyev.

'Nothing,' he replied, sliding his blade back into its sheath. 'Nothing at all.'

Zettran emerged from the crypt into utter bedlam. His jaw fell. This was not a Guardsman's war, the culmination of long periods of boredom shot through with heart-stopping terror and death from afar. This was a fight from the annals of myth, but made very real indeed.

The Ultramarines were fighting in three small groups, crimson-armoured heretics emerging from corridors and crypts to surround them. Near the altar, Aethor was dodging and rolling aside from the grasping claws of some monstrous metal behemoth whilst a tail-helmed Ultramarines officer slashed at its underbelly with a long, crackling sword. The giant beast was

spitting multicoloured flame, and the red-eyed gargoyles on its torso screamed in some dark tongue. It was so unnatural it hurt the eyes even to look in its direction.

At the heart of the basilicanum was a loose group of Ultramarines. They were covering each other with pinpoint bolter shots that blasted back any of their enemies that dared to come into the nave beyond. Where a renegade made it through the net of firepower, one of the battle-brothers barked a warning, and the nearest Space Marine dived forward, drawing a pistol to put a point-blank shot into the would-be attacker.

At the far end of the central sept, Lord Thursk walked forward, resplendent in his high-horned helm and billowing cloak. A pair of hulking, flesh-twisted daemon warriors came forward at his shoulders. He seemed in no hurry; when one of the rearguard Space Marines turned and sent a trio of bolts thundering towards him, they detonated harmlessly at arm's length.

The horned lord walked through the explosions without flinching, his armour trailing tongues of flame.

'That's him,' said Zettran. 'We go for that one. I reckon I can get in close.'

'You're insane,' said Dostoyev.

'Almost certainly.' Zettran glanced down at his mutated arm, and suddenly his cocksure expression was gone, replaced by bitterness. He felt as if the weight of the world was crushing him, and that it was all Dostoyev's fault, but he swallowed the feeling down, burying it under memories of long service at his comrade's side. 'You said it yourself, you self-righteous prig. I'm dead already I might as well leave a mark.'

He took off at a crouching run.

Aethor threw himself flat as the metal monster swung a massive, bladed claw. He winced as the spiked blade on its back caught his backpack, rolling through the backwash of fire it left in its wake as its underslung flamer belched ignited promethium.

'Too slow;' he called out as he fired his bolt pistol at the protrusion atop the machine's torso. The round exploded without leaving a mark, but it kept its gargoyle's mask pointed in his direction.

The monster pivoted the massive twin-barrelled autocannon that formed its arm, and Aethor barely had time to lean away as a volley that would

have split a tank scythed past him. He fell back on one hand, turning with the impetus to avoid a whipping claw before slashing his knife through one of the fibre bundles under its pincer. It took a few cables with it, but the creature's backswing was still viciously fast.

A dozen feet away, Thassarius was silhouetted against the shattered section of wall that formed a ragged archway behind the beast's lair. The captain had closed in from the monster's blind spot, power sword hacking at the pistons and tattered umbilical cables under its armour-plated limbs. One of its rear legs already hung useless, carving long scratches across the gravestones of the floor as the beast pivoted and swung, but it had not slowed. It stamped a giant bladed talon at Thassarius, shattering granite and sending the captain staggering away.

A giant claw scissored in close at Aethor's wrist, and he was forced to stumble sideways. He went with the motion at the last moment, rebounding from a pillar to plant a foot on one of the thing's blades and leap high onto the segmented platforms of its chassis. The plates that made its exterior burned hot, as if fresh from the forge.

Aethor saw alert runes flicker on his visor display as the thing bucked and swung in an attempt to dislodge him. Its sheer otherness was playing havoc with his machine-spirit, and the burning, axe-blow headache that had suddenly come upon him threatened to consume his consciousness altogether. He had flashbacks to fighting the Dreadnought in the crypt, to the crippling impact that plunged him into darkness.

What was he doing? How could he possibly hope to beat this thing? He was no more than vermin. A simple, primitive mammal that had no place outside its cave.

For a moment, the roof of the basilicanum seemed to fade away, and the infinite nothingness of the void spiralled above him. The stars formed mocking faces, each mind-wrecking in scale and galaxy-devouring ambition. They were the visages of evil incarnate. He was no more than a speck of dust by comparison, yet they would consume him just the same.

'Aethor!' A voice on the cusp of hearing. 'Wakeup, brother! What are you doing?'

One of the stars in the far distance flared bright, its light seeming to beam straight into his mind.

'Dying,' he said. Then he fell backwards into blackness.

Dostoyev watched agog as Zettran simply strode up to the horned giant, his lasgun slung and his arms wide as if greeting an old friend.

'Master! It is time!'

'The chattel amass,' said the renegade lord, snapping off a shot from his pistol towards the Ultramarines in the heart of the basilicanum. He looked up at the tower at the far end of the nave. 'Redivitus, sound the great bell.'

High above, ropes pulled taut and ancient wooden structures swung on greased axles.

Then came the toll, that terrible, daemonic sound. Dostoyev felt like he was struck by it, bowled backwards, riven inside and out, as if the sound waves had formed ice-cold claws and squeezed every organ in his body. He choked, tasting his own blood, and raised his lasgun on reflex.

Out from the crypts and curtained dungeons, a thrashing, screaming mass of pesciners boiled upwards, each wild-eyed puppet clambering over its fellows in its haste to stab and gnaw and kill.

Zettran shrieked, drew a knife, and charged the traitor lord. The world slowed to a crawl. For a moment, the Guardsman seemed for all the world like a weak-limbed, malnourished primate charging a majestic warrior king. Thursk, perhaps too amused to act until the last moment, readied his ornate blade.

At the same time Dostoyev clenched his jaw, steadied his lasgun on a stylised statue of a saint, and took aim.

The warlord swept his blade in a diagonal arc that cut Zettran in two from hip to shoulder. Just as his comrade's remains crackled back through the renegade's power field, Dostoyev breathed out and took his shot. The lasgun round hit the eye of Thursk's helm, grazing it black and sending him staggering.

A spike of triumph leapt in Dostoyev's heart. He was lining up another shot when he felt gnarled hands grab him from behind, yanking him backwards into a mass of mutant flesh. His body erupted in pain as the mutant pesciners dug iron-hard nails and yellowed teeth into his flesh. Wrenching himself away with a sudden surge of strength, he staggered forward - and straight into the clutching, crab-like claws of a mutant heretic Space Marine.

Twin lines of agony raced across Dostoyev's chest as the creature tightened its grip. His lasgun fell from senseless fingers.

'He's mine,' said the renegade lord. One of his eyes was black and useless.
'Put him down, half-daemon.'

Growling in protest, the daemonic thing dropped Dostoyev to the ground. He stumbled and fell as if he were made of rags, his limbs robbed of strength by agony and terror.

'Emperor curse you to the grave,' he managed, looking up at the horned giant in defiance.

'He's already dead. Didn't you hear?'

Thursk raised a boot, his silhouette the last thing that Dostoyev saw before it descended to crush his skull with a resounding crack.

CHAPTER TEN

CLASH OF BLADES

BASILICANUM OF ST CAPILENE

In the last two minutes, Emanad Titus had fought crimson-armoured doppelgangers, twisted mutants with blades for limbs, winged terrors that dropped from above and a laughing swordsman with two mouths. He had even taken an autocannon round from a towering, twenty-foot-tall daemon engine that had smashed him skidding across the hall.

Yet only now, as a tide of stinking, filth-covered human citizenry poured from hidden doorways behind the tapestries of the colonnades, did he feel doubt.

The damnable ringing of the bell in the campanile boomed out once more, and the people of the island surged forward as one. They reached out with arms pocked with abrasions, bruises and rope burns. They staggered on legs broken or bent by malnutrition. They moaned with voices long hoarse, the sound half agonised protest, half desperate plea. But they were alive, and they were Imperial citizens.

'Calistus,' called out Titus. 'Keep them back.'

'At your behest,' said the flamer operative, sending a wall of fire coruscating across the colonnade. The citizens, some animal instinct flaring within them, fell back with a chorus of moans. Titus watched two burst through where the flames were least intense. He aimed, and fired at the pillar just ahead of them. The bolt exploded so close they were bowled backwards by the shock wave, flinders of rock scoring their faces but leaving them alive.

'We will not be damned by your traps, heretics!' shouted Titus. Another three citizens leapt through the wall of flame, but Sevastus moved to intercede, using his chainsword as a bludgeon. As Titus laid down suppressing fire to keep any more from coming through, his sergeant was striking, then spinning, then kicking out and striking again, knocking over one, two, three with the flat of his blade. A great backwash of heat roared out once more as Calistus made free with his promethium.

The bell's mind-numbing toll rang out once more. A wave of citizens pushed straight through the flames, their eyes as wide as those of panicked cattle even as their skin burned and their baying voices were snatched away by the heat. The raw human frailty he saw in their expressions reminded him of the pesciner's family down by the coast, just for an instant.

And the plugs of wax they had wedged into their ears.

Remus sent a frag missile screaming in to explode six feet in front of the citizens and bowl them back through the flames. 'Sergeant,' shouted Titus over the din. 'It is a sonic curse. The bell must be silenced.'

'Acknowledged,' said Sevastus. 'Promethor, can you destroy it from here?'

'I can try,' said the plasma gunner, breaking off and sprinting down the central transept of the basilicanum. His gun, charging with a high-pitched whine, left a blue after-image behind him as he ran.

'Garus, cover him,' shouted Sevastus. The gunman nodded curtly and set off after Promethor.

Titus saw a Crimson Slaughter renegade lean out from behind a nearby pillar to take a shot. It missed Promethor by a hair's breadth. He sent a bolt flying back in reply, then another, the dual explosion knocking the traitor backwards. Two more renegades emerged from the pillars, then another. A furious storm of fire erupted from Toriad's heavy bolter, blasting them out of Promethor's path long enough for him to sprint past.

The gunner made it to the end of the transept and raised his plasma weapon to his shoulder before loosing an incandescent comet of energy from its muzzle. Titus saw it blaze towards the bell, but then burst in a cascade of liquid fire across its exterior without so much as singeing it. The runes engraved on the artefact's surface glowed bright. The plasma gunner took a second shot, but to Titus' horror, it had a similar lack of effect.

The daemonic bell tolled again, as if in dark triumph.

Once more the pesciners surged through Calistus' wall of flame; this time they were burned black, their eyes white and mouths pink in masks of charcoal flesh. Gaiun did not shoot with intent to wound, this time, but instead took down the burning thralls one after another with merciless efficiency.

'No!' shouted Titus, his throat suddenly tight with the feeling of having failed the humans he had sworn to protect. 'Gaiun, what are you doing?'

'We have no choice.'

'Remus!' shouted Sevastus. 'Can you take out that bell?'

'No,' said the heavy weapons specialist, loading his last krak missile. 'Not with one shot, if it has some manner of force aegis. But given a few more seconds I might be able to silence it...' A burning citizen lumbered through the flames towards Remus as he was aiming. Titus kicked the legs out from under the mutant, landing a sharp blow behind its ear to knock it cold.

More were emerging, made pillars of flame by the fire.

'Quickly!'

Remus' krak missile shot away, leaving a thin white trail as it made a straight diagonal for the bell. Titus watched in awe at the shot as the missile passed through scaffolded archways, looping ropes, even a shattered rose window before impact. It struck not the bell itself, but its clapper, the heavy pendulum exposed just for a fraction of a second as the bell swung high on its axle.

The metal clapper, with no protective spell of daemon runes upon it, was blasted to splinters of iron by Remus' pinpoint shot.

The bell fell silent. And with it, so did the crowd of citizens behind the flames.

Thassarius leapt back as the daemon engine's claw came whistling down to crash through a grave-slab and into the crypt below. The thing was indefatigable, a giant metal arachnid stabbing and slashing at the prey in its web.

One of its midsection limbs came in as Thassarius hacked at the hydraulics of its pincer, smashing into him so hard the jagged, dirty spike on its leg punctured his breastplate and dug into his lung. He wrenched

himself free with a roar, only to be bowled over by a bone-shuddering explosion as the beast's battle cannon boomed. Flat on his back, he could feel the wind howling through the shattered wall behind him, and even taste the tang of sea air rising from the steep drop beyond.

The thing stomped through a cloud of rock dust, a nightmare clad in iron. Thunderous booms came from above; the captain caught a glimpse of Toriad pouring heavy bolter fire into the wooden beams of the campanile. Promethor's plasma gun lanced hot white energy alongside each volley.

Thassarius took a shot with his plasma pistol to keep the beast at bay a moment longer, but its pincer whipped into its path. The shot melted nothing more than a section of armour plate.

A section of the campanile above the beast collapsed, broken timbers raining down to smash into the daemon machine's rear. The war engine staggered over Thassarius, its red-hot underbelly right above him. He lay flat, raising both legs, and planted his feet beneath it. With a great heave, the captain pushed it onwards over his head, adding to its momentum and turning its stumble into a lurch forward.

With a shrill metallic scream, the creature toppled through the shattered basilicanum wall and skidded down the slope beyond. It flung out a pincer to catch itself, but its own strength became a weakness as the giant claw pulverised a section of the wall in an explosion of masonry. One of its smaller limbs shot upwards, embedding in the lip of the cliff with a loud thunk.

Thassarius lanced his power sword into the pistons that kept its grip, the disruption field tearing the metal open in a spray of hydraulic fluids. Suddenly Aethor was at his side, his head matted with blood and a berserker snarl on his features. Together they wrenched at the claw as the giant machine fought to regain its balance. Toriad was next, ditching his heavy bolter and running over to add his formidable strength to the effort. Inch by inch, all three hauled the creature's pincer from the earth. With a shrill scream of denial, the daemon engine toppled down the cliff, tumbling end over end to smash on the sharp rocks far below.

It sank beneath the shark-infested waters, and was gone.

'I will have your skull for that!'

Thursk's bellowed challenge was terrifyingly loud, echoing even over the

din of detonating bolter rounds. Sevastus spun on his heel to see the renegade lord barrelling through a blossoming cloud of Calistus' promethium flame, shrieking ectoplasmic faces flying around him as if driven mad by his wrath. 'You will all die by my hand!'

Sevastus depressed the rune on the side of his chainsword, its throaty roar and urgent vibration firing up his own spirit. He charged down the transept to meet the renegade lord, his footsteps thudding loud on the flagstones.

Thursk lunged out with his tainted blade, the crackling broadsword's tip lancing forward as a swift killing strike. Sevastus' own momentum nearly carried him onto it, but he swerved his body aside at the last moment. Instead Thursk's strike scored a deep groove in his cuirass. The renegade recoiled like a snake and struck again. This time Sevastus batted the blade aside, but only just.

The heretic was fast, but worse, he had reach - and he knew how to use it.

Sevastus swept his growling chainsword hard at the renegade lord's wrists, hoping to take his hands and blade as one. Thursk was no longer there; he had moved with uncanny speed to the side, his cape billowing like that of a bulldancer baiting a spine-grox.

Whipping the chainsword around in a three-quarter sweep, Sevastus kept up the pressure as best he could. Thursk simply stepped back and raised his plasma pistol. The fat barrel glowed, almost blinding as it overcharged.

Sevastus took a shot with his grav-pistol, knowing it was all but spent. The grav field caught the end of the plasma pistol and yanked it downwards as if caught in an invisible lasso. Thursk's shot melted the flagstones a few feet in front of Sevastus. An eye-blink later the renegade lord charged over the molten pool of rock, his power sword lashing left and right.

Sevastus gave ground, dodged and parried, but the assault was relentless. He made a feint, but Thursk read it, letting it pass by his flank. The chainsword's teeth caught Thursk's robe, chewing hungrily at it and yanking him off balance before ripping free.

Seeing his chance, Sevastus shifted for a killing blow, but his heel caught a scattering of rubble. He went over hard. The tip of the daemon sword lashed out as Thursk regained his momentum, cutting away one of Sevastus' fingers and sending his chairisword spinning to the side. The pain was indescribable; suddenly a hundred laughing faces crowded his

vision, pressing in as if eager to watch him die.

Thursk came forward for the kill. On instinct, Sevastus kicked him in the knee, sending him staggering back.

Behind the Chaos lord he caught sight of Promethor firing plasma into the rafters as Toriad thundered heavy bolter shells into the wooden scaffolds that held the campanile aloft. A series of explosions rocked the vaulted ceiling.

Then, with a terrible groan, the entire belfry came down.

The daemon faces blurring Sevastus' vision dissipated, and he saw Thursk glance up at the collapsing belfry, presenting his shattered black eye just for a moment. Sevastus grabbed a rock with his injured hand and threw it as hard as he could at the Chaos lord's sword arm. It struck home, knocking his blade wide enough for Sevastus to get to his feet and jump forward; the last gasp of energy from his grav-pistol yanking the daemonic sword out of the traitor's hand.

Charging in close, Sevastus punched his adversary's plasma pistol wide before wrapping his hands around that great horned helm. His anger lent him strength, and he ripped the entire headpiece free with a roar of bloodlust before headbutting Thursk full in the face.

The renegade lord reeled, and Sevastus caught sight of the blooded face beneath. It was shockingly familiar, with that strange blend of rugged masculinity and partial gigantism that typified all Space Marines. It was unmarred by so much as a touch of mutation.

'You dare?' said Thursk, features twisting in a snarl. Sevastus saw something golden and luminous reflected in his eyes, just for a split second: the mirror image of something winged and glorious.

Whatever it was turned Thursk's expression of anger into one of pure; unalloyed terror.

Sevastus turned the helm upside down and rammed its twin horns into the Chaos lord's neck, one tip behind each collarbone. Leaning in, he drove the headgear down so hard the tips of each long spike dug deep into Thursk's vital organs. The sergeant realised with a fierce sense of gratification that he had impaled both Thursk's primary and secondary hearts at once.

The renegade lord fell backwards to the flagstones with a thud, blood spilling from his mouth. The shrieking phantasms swirling around him cried out - though whether in triumph or in denial, Sevastus could not

quite tell - and disappeared.

'You,' said Thursk through a glut of blood, eyes focused on something just behind Sevastus. Then his eyes glazed over, and he fell still.

Sevastus turned to look behind him but saw nothing. He made the sign of the aquila nonetheless. It was the first time he had done such a thing in years, but it felt right.

The sergeant turned back to the wider battle. Without their lord, his pet daemon engine and the infernal bell, the Crimson Slaughter renegades around the outskirts of the basilicanum were losing heart. Only the most mutated of their number fought on, running towards them with howls of dark outrage.

'Toriad,' said Sevastus. 'Bring the rest of that ceiling section down. I want these monsters to feel what it is to be buried alive.'

'Aye, sergeant.'

The hulking warrior sent more bolts hammering into the vaulted wooden tower, and moments later the rest of the construction collapsed, slamming into the charging renegades and burying them under countless tonnes of rubble. As one, the remainder of the Crimson Slaughter withdrew from the battle, abandoning their fellows to their fate.

To Sevastus' eyes, it was a fitting end.

'The civilians,' said Titus.

'There,' replied the sergeant. He pointed out of the colonnade at the ornamental gardens, where men and women were flocking towards the entrance to the commoners' crypts. 'The pesciners know the way well enough.'

'We will save who we can, and bring swift death to the rest,' Titus replied.

'The battle is far from over,' said Thassarius. 'We must call in the assault squads.'

Sevastus nodded, hearing the wisdom in the captain's words.

'They will seek revenge,' he said eventually, staring out at the receding tide. It glittered in the new light, a veneer of beauty over the dark truths beneath.

'Of course,' said Calistus, dapping his hand on Sevastus' pauldron. 'They want nothing less than to see the galaxy burn.'

Sevastus smiled. 'Then let us put them to the torch.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phil Kelly is the author of the Space Marine Conquests novel *War of Secrets*, the Space Marine Battles novel *Blades of Damocles* and the Warhammer 40,000 novellas *Farsight* and *Blood Oath*, as well as the Warhammer titles *Sigmar's Blood* and *Dreadfleet*. He has also written a number of short stories. He works as a background writer for Games Workshop, crafting the worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000. He lives in Nottingham.

An extract from *Dark Imperium: Plague War*.



Weak light bobbed through pitchy black, casting a pale round that grew and shrank upon polished blue marble quarried on a world long ago laid waste. The hum of a grav motor sawed at the quiet of the abandoned hall, though not loudly enough to banish the peace of ages that lay upon it. The lamp was dim as candlelight, and greatly obscured by the iron lantern framing it. The angles of the servo-skull that bore the lantern further cut the glow, but even in the feeble luminance the stone gleamed with flecks of gold. The floor awoke for brief moments at its caress, glinting with a nebula's richness, before the servo-skull moved on and the paving's glory was lost to the dark again.

The lonely figure of a man walked at the edge of the light, sometimes embraced by it completely, more often reduced to a collection of shadows and mellow highlights at its edge. The hood of his rough homespun robe was pulled over his head. Sandals woven of cord chased the light at a steady pace. The circle of light was small, but the echo of the man's footsteps revealed the space it traversed as vast. Less could be discerned about the man, were there anyone there to see him. He was a priest. Little else could be said besides that. It would certainly not be obvious to a casual observer he was militant-apostolic to the Lord Commander. He did not dress as men of his office ordinarily would, in brocade and jewels. He did not seem exalted. He certainly did not feel so. To himself, and to those poor souls he offered the succour of the Emperor's blessing, he was simply Mathieu.

Mathieu was a man of faith, and to him the Space Marines seemed faithless, ignorant of the true majesty of the Emperor's divinity, but the Mortuis Ad Monumentum had the air of sanctity nevertheless.

Mathieu liked it for that reason.

Beyond the slap of the priest's shoes and the whine of the skull, the silence in the *Mortuis Ad Monumentum* was so total, the sense of isolation so complete, that not even the background thrum of the giant engines pushing the *Macragge's Honour* through the warp intruded. The rest of the ship vibrated, sometimes violently, sometimes softly, the growl of the systems always there. Not where the priest walked. The stillness of the ancient hall would not allow it. Within its confines time itself held its breath.

Mathieu had spent his quieter days exploring the hall. Its most singular features were the statues thronging the margins. They were not just in ones or twos, effigies given space to be walked around and admired, nor were they ensconced in alcoves to decorate or commemorate. No, there were crowds of stone men, in places forty deep, all *Adeptus Astartes* in ancient marks of armour. It may be that they were placed with care once, but no longer, and further into the hall, the more jumbled their arrangements became. The hall had been breached in days gone by, and the statues destroyed. Untidy heaps of limbs were bulldozed carelessly aside and ugly patching marked wounds from ancient times.

The warriors remembered by the statues had died ten thousand years before Mathieu's birth. Perhaps they had even fallen in the Emperor's wars to create the Imperium itself. Such an incredible length of years, hard to comprehend, and yet now the being who had led these self-same dead men commanded the ship again.

It dizzied Mathieu that he served a son of the Emperor. He could not quite believe it, even after all that had happened, all that he had seen.

Mathieu stopped in the dark where a group of statues huddled together. White stone glowed grey in the gloom. He had the terrifying notion that they had come alive and gathered to block his path, a phalanx of ghosts angered by profanity. He put aside the thought. He ignored the cold hand of fear creeping up his back. He had come off course, nothing more. It was easy enough to get lost in a hall half a mile wide and almost as long.

His servo-skull bore a large HV upon its forehead. By the letter V alone he called it. He could not bring himself to refer to it by her name.

'V,' he said. His voice was pure and strong. It cut the shadows and frightened back the dark. Mathieu was an unimposing man, young, slight,

but his voice was remarkable; a weapon greater than the worn laspistol he carried on his left hip, or the chainsword he bore into battle. Loud and commanding before his congregations, it seemed tiny in the face of the dead past, but like a silver bell chiming deep in winter-stilled woods, it was clear and bright and lovely.

V emitted a flat, static-laced melody of acknowledgement.

‘Ascend five feet. Elevate lamp, pan left to right.’

The skull’s motors pulsed. It rose up into the high voids of the monumentum. The light abandoned Mathieu, angling instead for the still figures surrounding him. Stone faces leapt from the dark, as if snatching the chance to be remembered, quickly drowning again in the black as V turned away. For a moment Mathieu’s fear came back. He did not recognise where he was, until V’s pale lamplight washed over a Space Marine captain of some unremembered era, the right arm held so proudly aloft broken off at the elbow. This warrior he recognised.

Mathieu breathed in relief. ‘Descend to original height. Rotate lantern downwards to light my way. Proceed.’

V voiced its fractured compliance. There were pretensions to musicality in the signal, but the limited vox-unit was fifth hand at least, scavenged like all V’s other fittings, and overuse had blunted its harmonies.

‘Proceed to the hermitage, quickly now. My time for this duty is running out.’

V banked around and swept onwards. Mathieu picked up his pace to keep up.

The Adeptus Astartes pretended to disdain worship. It was well known among the Adeptus Ministorum that they did not regard the Emperor as a god. Mathieu had known this all through his calling. The truth had proved to be not so simple. On the ship there were many shrines, decorated lovingly with images of death, and containing the bones of heroes in reliquaries that rivalled those of the most lauded saint in their ostentation. The Ultramarines’ cult was strong, though they did not worship. In chapels that denied religion their skull-masked priests protested loudly about the human nature of the Emperor and the primarchs while venerating them as gods in all but name. Their practice of honour, duty and obedience was conducted with a fanatical devotion.

There was an element of wilful blindness to their practices, thought

Mathieu.

The way the Adeptus Astartes reacted to Roboute Guilliman bordered on awe. From the beginning Guilliman had warned Mathieu himself not to be worshipful, that he was not the son of a god. The priest had witnessed how irritated the primarch became with those who did not heed his words. And yet, these godless sons of his looked upon him, and they could barely hide their fervour.

Mathieu did as he had been told. He affected to see the man Guilliman wished to be, but his familiarity with the primarch was largely an act. Mathieu did revere the primarch, sincerely and deeply.

Previous militant-apostolics had carved themselves out a little realm in Guilliman's palace spire atop the giant battleship. The position came with appropriately luxurious quarters. Some time before Mathieu's tenure the largest room had been converted into a chapel of the Imperial Cult. It was gaudy, too concerned with expressions of wealth and influence and not faith. Mathieu had done his best to make it more austere. He removed some of the more vulgar fixtures, replaced statues of ancient cardinals with those of his favourite saints. There had been a sculpture of the Emperor in Glory standing proudly, sword in hand, upon the altar. Mathieu had replaced that with an effigy of the Emperor in Service; a grimacing corpse bound to the Golden Throne. Mathieu had always preferred that representation for it honoured the great sacrifice the Emperor made for His species. The Emperor's service to mankind was so much more important than His aspects as a warrior, ruler, scientist or seer. Mathieu always tried to follow the example of the Emperor in Service, giving up what little comfort he had to aid the suffering mass of humanity.

The chapel was tainted by the dishonesties of holy men. He preferred to lead worship with the ship's bonded crew in their oily churches. He maintained the private chapel only because the display was expected of him. He rarely prayed there.

For his private devotions he came down to this deserted cult monument of irreligious men.

At the back of the hall was a small charnel house, where the stacked skulls of fallen heroes were cemented in grim patterns. The dust lay thick on all its decoration when Mathieu had discovered it. Nobody had been there for a long time.

Beneath the eyeless stares of transhuman skulls, he had set up a plain wooden altar, this also bearing an effigy of the Emperor in Service. Arrayed around it were lesser statues of the nine loyal primarchs, as could be found in any holy place. That representing Roboute Guilliman was three times the size of the others. Mathieu genuflected to both Emperor and His Avenging Son, though the real Guilliman might well shoot him for doing so.

He knelt awhile and prayed to the statues, the Emperor first, His sons and then finally to Guilliman. He stood and took from a large ammunition box thirty-six candles which he added to the racks of hundreds around the periphery of the room. When the candles were in place upon their spikes, he ignited a small promethium flame, and from it lit the wicks one by one, whispering solemnly over each.

‘Emperor watch over you,’ he said. ‘Emperor watch over you.’

Each candle represented the wish for a prayer from a menial somewhere, those ordinary folk who made up the majority of the Imperial citizenry yet otherwise had no voice. When someone asked him for the blessing of light, Mathieu never refused, no matter how high or low, but promised to burn a candle for every request. There were so many pleas, so many in pain, even within the small world of a starship, that he could not possibly hope to keep his vow. In the end he had taken on aid, as his deacons insisted he should. Having always denied himself servants or servitors he was troubled by how easily he had got used to them. He never wanted to become like other high churchmen, with bloated households thousands strong, and feared this was but the first step on that road.

When he found himself taking the servants for granted, he had taken penance, straining the capacity of his auto-flagellator to punish himself. After his scourging he had prepared this hermitage for himself, clearing it out with his bare hands, washing the floors, crafting the objects of worship. When he had done, he had reverently set up an identical rack of candles to show his sincerity, so now every lost soul had two candles to burn for them; one above lit by his servants, and one below lit by himself. His hermitage was dark when he arrived. He doused the candles when he left and he relit them every single time he went within, until they burned down to stumps. There were always more to replace them.

‘The Lord Guilliman chose me for my humility,’ he said to himself. With

one unwavering hand he touched the promethium torch to every stick of wax. His other hand was clenched so tightly in his robes his knuckles glowed white in the candlelight. His auto-flagellator ran at a setting of mild agony. He let the pain thrill his body, purifying him of his selfish thoughts. ‘O Emperor, do not let me lose myself in this office. Do not let me damn myself by forgetting Your grace and Your purpose for me. Let me be free of pride. Let me be pure of purpose. Let me help Lord Guilliman to see the truth of Your light. Help me, O Master of Mankind.’

After an hour, he was finished. He took out a sanctus-astrogator from his robes and let it find the likely position of Terra for him. Whether it truly worked in the warp he did not know, yet he followed its suggestion, and genuflected in the direction of man’s ancestral home, where the Emperor dwelled in majestic pain.

That done, he went to his desk.

He lit six large candles lodged into the open tops of a pair of skulls. They had belonged to the faithful dead, martyred in anonymity by the marauders of Chaos. He thanked each of them for providing him light in the dark. Then he sat down and opened the leather tome he had upon the desk. The paper was smooth and creamy, far better than any he had used before. There were some benefits to being the primarch’s tool. The book fell open at the title page, displaying the legend *The Great Plague War*. Mathieu turned the pages, looking upon those chapters he had already finished but whose illuminations remained rough sketches. Before committing his thoughts to this history, he worked and reworked them in chapbooks, until he deemed them ready for this first drafting. Today was a momentous day. The next part of his testament was finished and could be laid down for posterity.

Guilliman required so little of him. Mathieu’s assessment of the position of militant-apostolic as a mouthpiece was accurate. He was called upon from time to time to advise the primarch on how to handle the church, or to deliver oratory to one gathering or another. Often, Guilliman rewrote his sermons.

Mathieu filled his time with service to the Emperor as he understood it. As he had gone among the poor and sick on the worlds of Ultramar, now he went among the Chapter and vessel serfs that served aboard the *Macragge’s Honour*, dispensing alms or medical aid, and bringing spiri-

tual comfort. In the dingy chapels of the lower decks he spoke of the Emperor's mercy. Baseline humans in the fleet were discouraged from religious demonstrations, for the Ultramarines found open worship distasteful, but they were not forbidden their beliefs either. Mathieu gave them what comfort he could. Their lives were hard. He pitied them.

At other times he wrote. Partly he wrote in slavish imitation of the sainted primarch, whose every spare moment was spent in his scriptorium. Mainly it was because he believed the deeds of Roboute Guilliman should be recorded by one of the faithful for the faithful, and not only preserved in the obscurity of the Ultramarines librarium.

Mathieu turned to the next blank page and opened his inkwell. He looked away from the book, his fingers spread on the paper, and took a moment to steady himself, clear his mind and make his soul ready for the sacred task. Only then did he take up his quill, dip the nib into black ink and meticulously write an ornate title.

The Sainted Guilliman's triumph upon Espandor against the horrors of the unclean powers.

He drew the letters slowly, filling the bubbles of each with decorative flourishes. Later, should the writing still stand up to his critical eye, he would expand these efforts at illumination, illustrating the document with fine pictures. For now, he sketched in a few ideas, only lightly so he might easily scrape them out. Once done, he thought a moment on whether to name himself as the author of the chapter. He wavered, then decided he would, and wrote quickly before he could change his mind.

As related by Militant-Apostolic Frater Mathieu of the Acronite Mendicants, third line postulant, who was present personally during the campaign.

He regretted his vanity as soon as he finished the sentences. Before commencing each instalment he had the same fruitless inner battle. Knowing only too well how fragmented documents could become over time, he had put his name under every chapter heading. Although he had been there on Espandor, and intended to refer to sights he had seen with his own eyes, there was little need to attribute the writing, less still to

point out who he was and who he had been. His story was not the point, the primarch's was, and yet he yearned to be recognised as its author. There was twofold pride in that sentence, in stating his exalted rank, and in insisting his humble origins so that all would know how high he had risen.

He meditated a moment, asking the Emperor for forgiveness. He resolved to write the entire account of the war, then remove his name. That was the way. He would continue with his ritual debate until the end, then purge himself from the account.

Breathing evenly so as not to disturb his penmanship, he started his story.

Upon Espandor, the Sainted Guilliman did drive back the forces of the dread primarch Mortarion, may he forever be condemned to suffering the Emperor's punishments for his treachery. With great force and intelligence, the Imperial Regent Guilliman, the last and most faithful of the sons of the living God-Emperor, did set his forces against those of the unspeakable ones, and so remove them from the world and its attendant subject planets. And in the star systems close by he attacked with such aggressive certainty of victory that the fell voidcraft of the enemy were pushed out, and the blockade lifted, so Espandor was brought relief. The cities were retaken, and in them all the Sainted Guilliman wept to see the temples of his father profaned, and the servants of Terra much reduced by sickness and by war, so that only a tenth of the peoples of Espandor who had been before living remained in the Sainted Guilliman's service, and that of Ultramar, and of He who rules from Terra.

For fifteen days the primarch did battle across Espandor, overthrowing the hegemony of daemons and Heretic Astartes alike. By cunning strategy, he drove them before himself, breaking their might and annihilating them piecemeal with his fury. With lightning strike and surprise assault, he divided the enemy and so overcame them. At the Spires of Priandor he cast down the rusting daemon-golems of the fallen Legio Onerus. The river of Gangatellium ran black with daemoniac ichor so deep that to purify its waters required the prayers of twenty-two high cardinals. In the provinces of Berenica, Ehora and Iorscira the enemy were routed and slain. So swift and terrible was the primarch's advance that all went to disarray before him, whether daemon, mortal, or undying legionary. At every clash the primarch led, the sword of his father flamed bright in his grasp. About the

Sainted Guilliman the protection of His angels and His saints burned bright in a terrible nimbus that lit the souls of the faithful with great strength, and smote the servants of the enemy wheresoever it did shine upon them. The minions of the Plague Lord, who feed upon despair and hopelessness, knew despair themselves. Yea! And their skin did smoke at the light's touch, and their wargear faileth, and the machine things that should not be fell into steaming parts, and were sent out of this realm forever.

Seven battles the primarch waged in defiance of the Plague Lord's unholy number, for seven brings the Plague Lord power. The seventh battle was the greatest of all.

At the commencement of every fight, Guilliman strode forth out before his armies and spake these words for all to hear.

'I am the Primarch Roboute Guilliman, fury of the Emperor! These worlds are under my protection. You will be driven out, and cast down, and all your number slain. There shall be no mercy for you who have turned your back on the holy light of Terra, and defied the divine grace of the Emperor. I call to you, and say, present unto me the arch-traitor Mortarion, my brother, fallen primarch and high daemon, and I shall take him, and slay him, and your multitudes will know the mercy of a swift death.'

I, Militant-Apostolic Mathieu, know these to be true accounts, for I was there at the Sainted Guilliman's side, and fought in the Emperor's name in the primarch's sight.

Naturally, Guilliman had not phrased his challenges quite like that, and there was maybe a little bit of flourish around the displays of the primarch's power. But Mathieu was convinced that the Emperor fought alongside His son. He could practically see Him. One day Guilliman would believe the truth of his father's nature, and thank Mathieu for showing him the path to faith. What he wrote might not be strictly accurate, but it was truthful, he was sure of that.

These minor additions bothered him not in the least, but another part did cause him disquiet.

His shameful pride had resurfaced. He chewed his lip in anguish, rereading the lines where he mentioned himself. He had fought there. The

Emperor's name was ever on his lips. That, more than the bolts of light his holy gun had fired, had brought many fell beings to ruin. He was, however, far from unique. Many other faithful warriors of the Imperium had lent prayer and las-blast to the charge. Their names were not recorded, why should his be? But then, was it so very wrong to recount his own, modest part in these struggles? In many hagiographies the narrator regaled the reader with their own deeds at the sides of the saints. On the other hand, how many other accounts had he read where there seemed to be no connection between teller and tale because the writer had let modesty win out, when their own deeds had been greater even than Mathieu's, so as to better honour their subject?

Mathieu's neck flushed. He was tempted to scratch the last sentence out. He had not intended to include it. Pride moved his hand.

His pen hovered over the offending line. Another memory stopped him. Guilliman had said to him after the battle of the Cooling Spire on Espandor's scorching equator that he had fought well. The approval of the primarch had been bestowed upon him. Had he not won the right to celebrate himself, if only a little?

He set aside the question for the time being. He was due on the lower decks soon, and he wished to finish before he went. A swift jolt from his auto-flagellator refocused his mind. Once the pain faded, he recommenced his work. The scratching of the pen cast its spell, and he fell into the storyteller's rhythm.

The power of the enemy was broken by degree. No final glorious struggle was fought upon Espandor, for the enemy was craven and would not be brought to battle, preferring instead the quiet ways of disease and despair. By many hundreds of desperate skirmishes were they finally rooted out. Dirty and hard the struggle was, and seemingly without end. Sickness and maladies of the soul took their toll on all but the most faithful of the Emperor's servants. But by His mercy the forces of evil are not infinite in their number, and so in this way was Espandor retaken piece by piece, until but small groups of the enemy remained upon its sacred earth, and these were ringed about by the siege lines of the avenging hosts, and marked by them for cleansing violence in due course.

Unto his lieutenants the primarch gave the final tasks of Espandor. War

raged across the firmament, yea, from Talasa unto Iax and all places between those systems. In this, wise Lord Guilliman spake to his generals.

‘A single man cannot in every place be, but he might move swiftly, and bring the full force of his might to bear upon the weakest places, and so with pressure crack the walls of the enemy, and shatter his line of supply. Thusly shall we triumph, and make Ultramar clean again.’

So speaking, he took his leave, and with him went fully eighty-nine point three per cent of his armies. From the blighted forests of Espandor did the Lord Primarch Roboute Guilliman set out with mighty host in train, driving his course towards Parmenio where the forces of dread Chaos gathered in great multitude.

This was better, Mathieu thought. More honest.

The warp was in awful tempest as the sainted primarch travelled, and the great vessel Adarnaton was lost with all hands, and others scattered far. The light of the Astronomican did flicker dimly, and be obscured for a space of time, and the fleet was sundered. Lo! And the holy fields of Geller did break, and daemons run amok amid the ships of the Emperor’s servants, and the primarch fought alongside his sons and with the lesser men, and did drive the warp spawn from his ship, and by his example did inspire other men to do the same.

The faithful raised shouted prayer to their Emperor as they fought, and the light of the beacon burned true again, and the warp calmed, and what daemons did remain were burned by the hymns of the faithful, so that soon no unclean creature remained, and those men struck by unnatural sicknesses were miraculously made well, and those close to death rose up and were become hale!

I saw this. I was there.

He grimaced. He had done it again. This time, he upped the output of his pain device so much that he cried out at its activation.

The expanses of the empyrean thereafter calmed to perfect smoothness, for the Emperor of all Mankind commanded it to be so, and in good time the primarch’s fleet made translation at the Tuesen System, which lies not far from the Parmenio System, and there regathered with much relief, for

ships thought lost were brought home into the fold, and losses made good.

Sundry undertakings were ordered to make the fleet fit once more, and a layover of three Terran weeks decreed.

On the ninth day there was a great rejoicing when the sky was rent and from out of the warp came one hundred and one ships in the service of the God-Emperor. Many loyal children of men journeyed from across the Imperium, seeming as if by chance, and Guilliman's warhost was greatly fortified by this good fortune. Taking his opportunity, Guilliman bade all his astropaths sing out a message without fear, for the warp was at rest, and he told them to summon what other aid they could to Ultramar, for many men under arms and war machines had come already at his command, but more he would have.

And then did he retreat to his strategium awhile, and set himself into thought.

He emerged ten hours later, and lo! was there the promise of victory upon his face, and a light did shine about his head. 'Tell my finest astropaths to speak with their brothers upon the star fortress Galatan, and bring it hence to orbit around the prime world of Parmenio, and rain its fire down upon the unbelievers and the faithless, for in this way am I sure to destroy my brother, and undo the works of the unspeakable Plague God.'

Immaterial breach was made without incident, and in fine array the ships sailed again upon the seas of the empyrean where the light of the Emperor may be witnessed, and His eye is upon all.

From Tuesen, Parmenio was but two weeks' journey, and the beacon light in the empyrean blazed strongly, and the soul seas between were much becalmed, so that the Navigator of the Macragge's Honour, Guilliman's great conveyance, did come down from his navigatorium to speak in wonder and in faith of the sights he had seen upon the currents of that Other Place. Of angels, and of saints, and walls of gold that held back the tides of evil that would drown us all, and take out our souls from our bodies.

By the grace of the Emperor, messages passed between the fleet and the fortress of Galatan, whose power was commanded that day by Chapter Master Bardan Dovaro of the Novamarines. Dovaro promised fealty, and immediate obedience, but delivered his utmost apologies. The star fortress, stationed then at Drohl, was slow in its hugeness, and so was delayed by

dint of its own might, for verily it mounted many guns and carried a great host of the Emperor's warriors, and much labour was needed to bring it out of Drohl thence to Parmenio. The Avenging Son would not wait, but told Dovaro to come as fast as he might, and upon arrival deploy the ancient power of Galatan in the Imperium's favour.

Guilliman was resolved to make haste to the prime world of the Parmenio System with the greater part of his armies, where the enemy gathered all but exclusively, and there to save those of the good people of the Imperium that he might from painful death and the soul oblivion. Victory was assured by His decree, for the Emperor protects, as all faithful men and women know.


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Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.
Cover illustration by Christian Byrne.

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ISBN 13: 978-1-78496-901-1

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