



THE BEAST  
ARISES

# THE HUNT FOR VULKAN

DAVID ANNANDALE



**WARHAMMER**  
40,000



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THE BEAST ARISES

BOOK SEVEN

# THE HUNT FOR VULKAN

DAVID ANNANDALE



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*Fire sputters... The shame of our deaths and our heresies is done. They are behind us, like wretched phantoms. This is a new age, a strong age, an age of Imperium. Despite our losses, despite the fallen sons, despite the eternal silence of the Emperor, now watching over us in spirit instead of in person, we will endure. There will be no more war on such a perilous scale. There will be an end to wanton destruction. Yes, foes will come and enemies will arise. Our security will be threatened, but we will be ready, our mighty fists raised. There will be no great war to challenge us now. We will not be brought to the brink like that again...*

# PROLOGUE

## Caldera – Torrens

The horde was a lava flow. It was composed of muscle and machine, but it had all the power of molten rock. It covered the landscape. What it swallowed was destroyed forever. And it was unstoppable.

The jaws gaped. They were wide enough to engulf the world. And there was hunger in them to devour his family.

On the ramparts of Torrens, Emil Becker jerked the magnoculars back and forth. He saw jaws. He saw corded arms and snarling faces. He saw the tracks of huge machines. He saw the movement of titanic, brutal power. At full magnification, the lenses could only show fragments of the enemy's bodies and weapons. Blurred hints of the totality of violence.

The orks were already that close.

Becker lowered the magnoculars, losing detail, seeing instead the size of the horror, a huge upheaval smashing through the jungle. He could feel the wave heading towards the wall. Towards his settlement. Towards his family.

Terror was a spike in his throat. He tried to swallow it down.

On his right, his daughter said, 'So many.'

'Yes.' He glanced at Karla. Her face, like his, was covered in dust from work in the tunnels below – as good a form of camouflage in the night as any other.

Her teeth showed white in the dark as she smiled. 'Caldera tests us again, father.'

Becker looked out at the howling, grinding night again. 'No,' he said. 'Not Caldera. Not this time.'

He understood the convulsions of the land. That was the birthright of every Calderan. The eruptions and earthquakes were the language of the planet, its sermons and its rages. Life was eternal vigilance, eternal expectation of the coming of flame, rock and ash. The pride that came with survival was the reward for being a citizen of this world.

Caldera destroyed its children, but it did so without malice. It was violently alive, and to die in its embrace was no tragedy. It was the basic reality of the world.

What advanced towards the settlement of Torrens was also violently alive. There were even sounds carried over the wind to Becker that resembled joy. It was a joy alien to Caldera and to humans. It was the joy of destruction. There was malice out there.

Approaching fast.

Torrens was a mining settlement built into the rocky western slope of a basalt plateau. At the base of the slope was jungle that stretched to the west almost as far as the capital, Laccolith. Much of Caldera was blasted rock, but here, after it had been destroyed before the coming of Imperial colonists a millennium ago, the jungle had returned, the ground fertilised by the ash from the twin volcanic peaks to the north that marked the beginning of the Ascias Rift valley.

Torrens was walled, its plasteel barrier more substantial than any of its housing. The fortifications kept the violent fauna of Caldera at bay. They would do nothing against the life that roared towards Torrens now.

The orks flattened the jungle in their advance. Their huge tanks and towering walkers smashed through trees, and behind them came the infantry. The beasts covered so vast an area that they must have numbered in the tens of thousands. The flames from the exhausts of their machines illuminated the undulations of an enormous mass. A flood of destructive muscle, come to butcher and burn.

There were still lights on in Laccolith. Becker could see the glow of the city at the horizon. It was dirty with smoke. The vox-transmissions from the capital were sporadic and filled with terror, but at least they were a sign of life. The greenskins had not razed the city and killed everyone there. Not yet. He didn't understand why that was. What could have pulled the orks away from their prize? Not the trivial presence of Torrens.

Boredom? Becker wondered. Laccolith's population was in the millions.

Total eradication would slow the orks' march of conquest.

The guess was a weak one. And what did it matter? The orks were coming here. Torrens would not delay them at all. It would afford the horde a diversion. An amusement.

Becker looked to his left and right. The entire length of the wall was lined with miners. Hundreds of them, every able-bodied member of every clan. There were plenty of lasrifles to go around. Caldera's indigenous life forms mandated vigilance and armament. There were two autocannon turrets, one at each end of the west wall. The citizens of Torrens would stitch the jungle with las and shells. As long as Becker kept his gaze on his comrades, he could believe in their strength. But when he looked west again, the futility of their show of determination sank in.

'How long do you think we can hold them off?' Karla asked.

Becker shrugged. 'What's your guess?'

'Until they kill us.'

'Sounds right.'

'Maybe they won't notice us,' Heinz Wenlandt said. He stood on the other side of Karla, a tense shadow. He was over forty, like her, but sounded twenty years younger. Not in a good way.

Karla snorted. 'Dreamer.'

'Why?' Wenlandt begged. 'We're not in their path to anywhere.'

'Neither is the jungle,' Karla said.

'We are their path,' said Becker.

The orks proved him right a few moments later. Even though the wall was still beyond the range of their rifles, the infantry started shooting. Then the tanks and huge walkers opened fire. Their cannon shells streaked for Torrens, slashing the night with trails of flame. Becker's shoulders hunched as the destruction shrieked out of the darkness. Shells hit the fortifications. Others arced further and landed in Torrens itself.

In the second before the blasts, Becker shouted and pulled the trigger of his lasrifle. He had no targets. He had only the will to fight before he died. Then the plasteel beneath his feet shook. The air filled with flame. The central portion of the wall exploded, a storm of wreckage punching backwards through the colony. More shells blew away chunks of the upper portion of the ramparts. The ork volley hammered the barrier to a slumping ruin.

Becker coughed, eyes and throat stinging with smoke. The skin of his neck felt baked from the proximity of the fireballs. The parapet sloped sharply to his right and he held on to one of the outward-curving spikes of the crenellations to keep from falling. Between the concussions of the shells came the screams of the wounded. Many more were already dead. But the rest were fighting. The citizens of Torrens clung to the parapet, clambered over still-settling wreckage, and rushed forwards to the battered wall to lash the enemy with bursts of las. Karla was still at his side, burning through her gun's power pack, her temple bleeding from a glancing hit by shrapnel. Wenlandt was pale, shaking, his face sheened with sweat and fear, but he was shooting too.

We're still fighting, Becker thought. Even less than a minute into the battle, that felt like a victory. They would fight until extinction. He would die clutching that pride.

The orks streamed from the jungle. At their head were troops on bikes and in trucks. Freed of the trees, the vehicles raced over the gentle slope of scree towards the rise of the wall. Their engines screamed their hunger. Filthy smoke billowed in the night. Blinding headlamps jerked up and down as the speeding machines bounced over rocks. Dazzled, Becker could not guess at the numbers, but the roar was deafening. The infantry ran close behind, and the heavy armour continued its bombardment.

The green tide was almost on Torrens. Becker fired, knowing he could not miss, and knowing his courage had no effect. At least the struggle left no room for grief.

And then the lead truck exploded. The fireball caught bikers, turning them into rolling, out-of-control torches. They careened into other vehicles. Another truck blew up, close by but not involved in the mounting collision. A bike rose suddenly and hurtled through the air. It crashed into more riders.

The ork advance stumbled. The flames grew higher. Silhouetted by the fire was a towering armoured figure wielding a gigantic hammer. He swung it into the grille of an oncoming truck, and the front of the vehicle crumpled as if it had slammed into a mountainside. The truck flipped end-over-end, flattening bikers and its own occupants when it crashed back to earth. The ork infantry swarmed the warrior. He obliterated them, each of his blows as devastating as an artillery shell. Ork chieftains larger than the

warrior went down as quickly as their underlings.

With a great, sweeping attack, the warrior hacked a clearing through the foe. For a moment he stood alone, surrounded by corpses and wreckage, framed by fire. Becker saw him more clearly: the huge reptilian skull on his shoulder-plate, the obsidian skin and the profile of unyielding nobility.

The warrior spoke, and his voice boomed over the barbaric snarls of the greenskin war machine. *'Children of Caldera! You fight with spirit! Fight on, and know you do not fight alone!'*

In the next moment, the heavy shelling shifted its target from Torrens and fell on the lower slope. The warrior vanished. The ground became a single explosion, an eruption that went on and on until Becker's ears were bleeding. One of the ork walkers, a twenty-metre-tall monster of shambling metal plates and weapons, its head a maw of jagged savagery, towered over the blasts and fed them with an unceasing stream of cannon fire, destroying hundreds of greenskins in the attempt to kill the single defender.

Becker's heart clenched, hope extinguished just as it flared. But he didn't let up with his rifle, shooting into the fire, and then into the smoke as the barrage finally ended. The warrior had won Torrens a few more seconds of existence, and he was grateful for that. He obeyed the hero's last command. He fought on.

The ork monster took a thundering step forwards. Then it stopped. Its weapon arms jerked. The colossal chainblade on the right stopped whirring. Smoke poured out of the shoulder. A few seconds later, the left cannon limb's shots went wild, and then it too shut down. The machine rocked back and forth, vibrating with internal explosions. Its chest blew out with a massive gout of flame, sending huge slabs of metal flying hundreds of metres through the air. The interior of the walker was an inferno. The giant warrior emerged from the ragged gap in the chest. He leapt to the ground as the machine died behind him. It was immobile now, nothing more than a gigantic furnace.

The warrior turned once more towards Torrens and raised his hammer in salute. Then he pounded across the scree, heading north. He slammed through an ork phalanx that was coming up in the wake of the barrage.

Becker's finger still squeezed the trigger, but he was barely aware of doing so. Jaw agape, he stared as one miracle succeeded another. The

warrior could not have survived, but he had, and now he was single-handedly changing the course of the flood. The greenskins lost interest in Torrens. Engines ground, infantry howled and the horde altered its course. It rounded on the warrior. It pursued the being that had hurt it. Minor streams of orks still climbed the slope, but now the miners faced a war, not extermination.

‘What...’ Karla began, but could not finish.

Becker shook his head. He had no more words for an answer than she had for a question. He did not know what he had seen. But he felt the brush of legend.

And the awe born from a glimpse of eternity.

# ONE

## Mars – Pavonis Mons

The *Alcazar Remembered* was at low anchor, in geostationary orbit over Pavonis Mons. Thane sat with his Fists Exemplar veterans in the troop hold of the Thunderhawk *Honour's Spear*. The company was descending in a show of force, leading with multiple gunships and tanks. There had been no overt resistance from the Adeptus Mechanicus. So far.

The gunship shook. Thane tapped the vessel's vox. 'I trust that wasn't hostile fire, Brother Preco,' he said to the pilot.

'Just turbulence, Chapter Master,' Preco responded. 'But I'm receiving another hail.'

'More turbulence,' said Abbas, sitting across from Thane.

'More than likely,' Thane said. 'Patch it through, Brother Preco.'

The vox-speaker crackled, and the voice that emerged sounded like static shaped into syllables. 'This is Artisan Trajectory Augus Van Auken. Approaching vessels, you are not authorised to make landfall on sacred Mars. You must reverse course at once.'

'I am Chapter Master Maximus Thane of the Fists Exemplar. My orders come from Chapter Master Koorland, Lord Commander of the Imperium. His authority supersedes any you might claim, and over the Adeptus Astartes you have none at all.'

'You should not force a confrontation.'

'I have no intention of doing so. Turn Magos Biologis Eldon Urquidex over to us, and we will depart upon the instant.'

There was a pause before Van Auken spoke again. Thane pictured gears realigning in the cold mind of the Mechanicus priest. 'You must leave at

once,' he repeated, as if Thane had made no demand.

'We shall speak once we have landed,' Thane said pleasantly, ignoring Van Auken in turn. 'Face-to-face conversations are more conducive to an understanding, don't you think?' He shut down the channel. To Preco, he said, 'No further communications until we land.'

'Understood.'

Thane became aware of a deep stillness to his right. He turned to look at Aloysian. The only sign of the Master of the Forge's concern was the rhythmic opening and closing of the vice jaws of one of his servo-arms. The movement was slight, barely more than a vibration. It stood out against the absolute immobility of the rest of his form.

'You are troubled, Master Aloysian,' Thane said, speaking the obvious. How could the Techmarine not be? The mission was creating a conflict between his oaths of loyalty.

'I am.'

'We are not seeking war with Mars.'

'But we may find it.'

*And then what?* Thane almost asked, but stopped himself. It would not do to imply a lack of trust. Instead, he said, 'That would amuse the orks greatly. I don't propose to give them that satisfaction. I will do everything in my power to avoid bloodshed. You have my word on that.'

Aloysian's nod was slight. 'I believe you, Chapter Master. But will the Mechanicus make the same effort?'

'You are better placed to answer. What do you think?'

'I don't know,' Aloysian said. 'The greater the secret possessed by Urquidex, the more desperate the priests of Mars will be to keep it to themselves.'

'And the more vital it becomes for us to learn that secret.'

'Precisely. So where, Chapter Master, do you see the way to avoid war?'

*Honour's Spear* shook harder, hammered by the Martian wind storms. Thane accepted the interruption gratefully. He had no answer for Aloysian.

The gunship broke through the smog-choked clouds of Mars. Thane looked through the viewing block and beheld the Pavonis Mons complex reaching up for him. Somewhere in that vastness, Urquidex was being held. The volcano was almost four hundred kilometres wide, and monolithic Mechanicus architecture covered its surface completely. The

slope of Pavonis Mons was a gentle one, taking hundreds of kilometres to rise fourteen, but the colossal edifices and manufactoria turned it into a twisting, spiked, aggressive prominence. The fifty-kilometre caldera sprouted a cluster of gigantic chimneys, each the size of an Imperial Navy battle cruiser. They vomited the waste of Mechanicus industry into the sky, a more noxious and violent eruption than the volcano itself had ever produced.

As *Honour's Spear* descended, the details of the structures became clear. Towers that Thane had taken for manufactoria were single machines, thousands of metres high. Some rotated around each other in a slow, majestic dance. Others were the pistoning ribs of an inconceivably gigantic beast. They connected to the monstrous buttresses and vaults of the manufactoria proper, of the habs for tens of millions of servants of the Omnissiah, and of laboratoria the size of hives.

‘How will we find our quarry in that?’ Abbas asked.

‘The terrain is not unknown to me,’ Aloysian said quietly.

‘I hope we will not have to seek him,’ said Thane. ‘I hope he will be brought to us.’

‘A faint hope,’ said Aloysian.

Thane made no answer. Below, the immensity of the Pavonis Mons complex stretched its iron claws upwards.

The gunships and transports came down at the edge of the space port at the base of the south face of the mountain. Alarms wailed from the towers of the port and the spires of the complex spilling off the slope and onto the surrounding plain. The Thunderhawks disgorged troops and vehicles, then rose to fly overwatch for the company. Thane organised the deployment with an eye to a maximum display of power. The battle-brothers marched at the head of the column. The Rhinos, empty except for their drivers, brought up the rear. In between came the tanks: Land Raiders, Predators, Vindicators and Whirlwinds. There was the strength here to flatten a city, and there was more to come. But Pavonis Mons was more than a city. Thane hoped the initial threat would be enough. He would escalate it as required, though he hoped he would not have to do so.

But Aloysian’s logic was sound.

The column rumbled away from the space port. It followed the main

transport avenue running from the space port to the Tharsis Gate. Embedded in the immense walls encircling the base of the volcano, the Tharsis Gate was the primary access point to the Pavonis Mons complex, both above and below the surface of Mars.

Cathedral warehouses and cloud-piercing manufactoria lined the avenue's sides. Webs of monorail tubes ran overhead, forcing the Thunderhawks higher. Ochre dust blew down the canyons between the structures. A sea of Mechanicus serfs and monotasked servitors parted ahead of the Fists Exemplar, a thousand thousand pedestrians and transports funnelling into cavernous cargo and work bays, or melting into narrower streets held in perpetual night by the shadows of the towers. From the jutting rise of the complex came an angry red glow. Cataracts of molten ore fell hundreds of metres from spouts to receptacles. Thane gazed at what he had come to bend to his will: a great mechanism, too large for the eye to encompass, too powerful for even its operators to comprehend. A mountain of metal and stone rumbled and groaned.

And it cried out.

The sirens whooped, Mars warning of invaders, Mars preparing for war. At the other end of the avenue, where it opened up into the kilometres-wide Square of the Infinite Reach before the Tharsis Gate, Thane saw the Mechanicus forces gather, and then move.

'Where did they come from?' Raalega asked. The Tharsis Gate was shut fast.

Aloysian spread his servo-arms, taking in the industrial sprawl on all sides. 'From everywhere,' he said. 'There are thousands of concealed access points just in this quadrant. The Mechanicus will reach what must be held, and provide no route for the enemy. So Mars will always be defended.'

The two forces came together in the Square of the Infinite Reach. Electro-priests and skitarii walked just ahead of Kastelan robots and their datasmiths. The robots were lumbering monsters, twice the height of their controllers. Their forms had a kinship to Space Marine power armour, but their heads were smooth eggs of metal, faces replaced with grey plates. Huge cannons rose over the metal skulls from the carapace: incendine combustors. Their power fists crackled with red and blue energy.

On the flanks rolled servitor tanks. The Kataphron Destroyers and

Breachers were tracked behemoths, built up around things that had once been human. The only remnants were the shaved heads, snarling, bestial, pallid and blank-eyed, attached to machinic torsos wielding cannons and hydraulic claws.

Onager Dunecrawlers clanked up along the road at the rear of the column. Insectoid limbs carried reliquary hulls armed with eradication beamer cannons. The Dunecrawlers swivelled their weapons back and forth, aiming over the Mechanicus. Some were monitoring the Space Marine tanks. Others were tracking the movements of the gunships.

More forces were joining the Mechanicus column. Thane saw individual units emerge from manufactoria and hatches opening and closing in the surface of the roads and the square. Aloysian was correct. For the Adeptus Mechanicus, the terrain was porous, offering innumerable means of closing with an enemy. But to the foe, the ways would be shut or death traps. There was only one entrance that might conceivably be stormed and secured: the Gate.

The Tharsis Gate was a hundred metres high and wide, and at that it was half the height of the wall. An engraving of the divided skull of the Cult Mechanicus occupied the Gate's entire surface. There was no seam, no sign of whether it parted down the centre or rose into the wall. Thane bore no illusions about opening it from the outside. The Fists Exemplar would have to pierce it.

The Mechanicus column grew as it advanced. It was a mechanised serpent of crimson robes, crimson plate, articulated metal limbs, pulsing energy and coiling mechadendrites. There was so little of the human in the display before Thane that war seemed not unthinkable, but inevitable. He thought of what Koorland had told him of Fabricator General Kubik: that the High Lord appeared to regard the ork attack on the Imperium with the detachment of an outside observer. He spoke as if Mars were not threatened, as if the orks were more fascinating than dangerous, and as if the Cult Mechanicus had an alliance of convenience with the Imperium, and nothing more.

At this moment, Koorland's concerns had the ring of grim truth.

The Fists Exemplar and the Mechanicus stopped with less than fifty metres between them.

'Point-blank range,' Abbas voxed over a private channel.

‘Yes,’ said Thane. At this distance, the combined fire of the two armies could leave nothing but a huge crater. They were edging towards a catastrophe beyond war. ‘We must tread carefully.’ He switched to the command network. ‘We are not here for battle,’ he said. ‘Keep that foremost in your minds, brothers. There will be no weapons fire without my express command. The situation is fragile. We will not be the ones to engage first. But we *will* complete our mission.’

‘Chapter Master,’ Abbas said, ‘does the Mechanicus understand the concept of the bluff?’

‘Do you think that’s what we’re doing?’

‘No. But I hope our opponents are.’

At least Abbas had not used the word *enemies*.

From the towers of the manufactoria, and from the Martian war machines, vox-casters spoke from all sides. They surrounded the Fists Exemplar with the inhuman tones of Van Auken. They were the voice of a single priest, and that unity, amplified hundreds of times, gave the artisan the same authority as if he had been Mars itself.

*‘In the name of the Omnissiah, go no further. Turn back now.’*

If there was something Thane could count on in the present volatility, it was the precision of Van Auken’s words. He had never known an adept of the Mechanicus to use language carelessly. Van Auken had commanded, but he had not threatened. He was reserving a small space for manoeuvring.

Thane would have to make him back up. He used his vox-grille to speak, to broadcast his response to the Mechanicus warriors and to Van Auken. ‘We have our orders. They are the same as yours, from the Lord Commander of the Imperium, and in the name of the Emperor. Release Eldon Urquidex to our custody.’

*‘In the name of the Omnissiah, go no further. Turn back now.’*

The perfect, mechanical repetition. It might as well have been a recording. Thane knew it wasn’t. Perhaps all Van Auken had left was escalation. As did Thane.

‘Chapter Master,’ Aloysian voxed. ‘Is one magos worth the cost we are facing?’

‘Would you abandon our mission?’ Thane glanced to his left. The Master of the Forge was in the front line, a visible reminder to the Mechanicus of

the fused alliance between Mars and Terra.

‘I am not suggesting dereliction,’ said Aloysian. ‘I am weighing the consequences. Which would cause more damage to the Imperium – the loss of Urquidex, or war on Mars?’

‘Your logic is faulty, Master Aloysian. The information Urquidex possesses may outweigh any disaster here.’

‘We don’t know.’

‘No. But we know our orders. We know our oaths of moment.’

Aloysian was silent.

‘I appreciate your situation,’ Thane said. ‘But...’ He trailed off and waited.

Aloysian grunted. It was a very human sound, a rare expression of emotion from the Techmarine. ‘I know what I am,’ he said. ‘I am Adeptus Astartes. I am an Exemplar. My duty is clear, Chapter Master.’

‘I have no doubt it is. I will still spare us war if it is at all possible.’

Aloysian shook his head. ‘It will not be.’

Still, I will act as though it is, Thane thought. ‘This confrontation is senseless,’ he boomed to the Martian warriors. ‘We all serve the same Imperium. We all serve the Emperor. Will you turn your back on the Imperium in its moment of peril? I will not believe this of the priests of Mars. And now we will pass.’

He began to walk forwards. ‘A steady advance,’ he ordered the company. ‘Slow. Give them time to move back. Weapons at ready, but do not address targets. We go forwards, we do not stop, but we do not fire. Acknowledge.’

Clicks came back to him over the vox.

The Fists Exemplar advanced. The space between the forces shrank.

Van Auken watched the vid-screens and hololith tables. He was in a command centre below the surface, near the core of Pavonis Mons. The screens covered the walls. Feeds updated themselves every second. Targeting data from the Dunecrawlers changed as they tracked gunships and tanks. An auspex-mechanic sat before each column of screens, summarising and condensing the slivers of situation into bursts of code, their signals running through the cogitators and into the Artisan Primus’ mechadendrites plugged into the master console. Moment to moment, he had a near-total awareness of the entire territory running from the space

port to the Tharsis Gate.

‘They are advancing,’ transmitted Sicarian Princeps Tynora 7-Galliax.

‘I am aware of this development.’

‘Understood, Artisan Primus. The delay between the situational change and your orders prompted my erroneous conclusion.’

It was possible to discern a veiled insult in her explanation. Van Auken ignored it. ‘Do not allow them to pass.’

‘What means are authorised?’

‘The mass of our forces. Do not engage.’

‘Unpredictable contingencies raise the likelihood of combat to near-certainty.’

‘The Adeptus Astartes are highly disciplined. The possibilities of intemperate error are concomitantly reduced.’

‘Accepted without optimism. Query: is the risk an efficient use of resources?’

‘We have not yet ascertained the degree of the heretic Urquidex’s knowledge. Once the full extent of the damage has been ascertained, he will be mind-wiped. The Adeptus Astartes may claim him at that point. Until then, his threat outweighs all others. Premise: the Fists Exemplar are also fully conscious of the consequences of war. Their data is also incomplete. They can conceive of no escape for Terra from the orks. Theorem: conflict here while orks are over Terra will be avoided as an absolute evil.’

‘Counter-hypothesis,’ said 7-Galliax. ‘Lacking alternatives, they will stop at nothing.’

‘Possibility evaluated and dismissed,’ Van Auken said.

He watched the two forces come together. With all the variables clamouring for his attention, there was no room for doubt.

The Mechanicus closed ranks. There were only a few metres between Thane and the line of skitarii.

‘They don’t want to let us through,’ said Abbas.

‘We shall have to convince them otherwise,’ replied Thane

The solid wall of Fists Exemplar closed the gap. The Adeptus Astartes towered over the skitarii vanguard troops. The armour of these warriors was heavy by Mechanicus standards – they were more substantial and less

insectoid than many of their comrades. They were still dwarfed by the Space Marines.

The Fists Exemplar did not pause. They pressed forwards, steady and inexorable as the tide. Thane kept his bolter against his chest, barrel angled up. He was not attacking, simply advancing. Skitarii rifles were pointed at him. He pushed into the barrel of the vanguard warrior before him. He took another step, forcing the other to choose between taking a step back, firing, or engaging in melee combat. The skitarius stepped back. So did the rest of the line. The Fists Exemplar moved forwards again.

Then a command must have been issued. The retreat halted, the Dunecrawlers, Breachers and Destroyers manoeuvring to form a wall of metal. The Fists Exemplar could overwhelm the skitarii physically, but they would not be able to push past the Mechanicus heavy armour without using their own.

The chances of avoiding war shrank still further.

Thane had no choice; the mission demanded he advance. He decided to take the risk of raising the stakes. He would make those augmetic eyes blink yet.

He raised Weylon Kale on the *Alcazar Remembered*. ‘Shipmaster,’ he said, ‘begin the drop.’

‘So ordered, Chapter Master.’

‘They have the physical mass to force us back,’ 7-Galliax reported.

‘Hold as long as possible,’ Van Auken said. ‘When the heavy armour comes into play, fire warning shots.’

7-Galliax’s reply was cut off by a binharic squeal from one of the auspex-mechanics.

Van Auken processed the data. He felt stirrings of something that went beyond concern. Auto-regulators sought to contain the disruptive effect of his nervous system’s injection of adrenaline. ‘Correction,’ he said to 7-Galliax. ‘We have detected launch flares from the Adeptus Astartes battle-barge. All units begin warning fire. Do not hit the Adeptus Astartes. Be prepared to fall back and establish barrage fire that they cannot cross.’

The Fists Exemplar slowed. They leaned into the skitarii, their block of strength edging closer and closer to outright combat, but they did not train

their guns. The tanks rolled up behind them.

Aloysian said, 'Stalemate is inevitable.'

'It won't last long,' Thane answered.

'That is the source of my concern.'

'Patience, Master of the Forge. Look to the skies.'

The streaks of the drop pods appeared a few moments later. They cut through the Martian atmosphere like bloody claws. There were four of them, carrying the rest of the veteran company's strength to the field.

In the next instant, the Mechanicus forces began to shoot.

'Hold fire!' Thane shouted over the vox. Trigger discipline held, long enough for the Space Marines to realise the energy beams were passing overhead. 'The...' He caught himself. He had almost said *the enemy*. 'The Mechanicus seeks to intimidate. We are not at war.' Broadcasting again, he called to the skitarii and tech-priests, and to Van Auken, wherever he was. 'We are not at war,' he repeated. 'Do not force a battle none of us would choose. Be one with us. Be one with Terra and against the orks!'

The only response was continued fire. It turned into a canopy of devastating energy. Even perfect precision could not stop it from shearing the facades of buildings. Rockcrete disintegrated. No wreckage fell. The sheer volume of the destructive beams took everything they hit apart at the molecular level.

The strobing flash of the beams played havoc with Thane's optics. He blinked off the filters and kept pushing, driving the skitarii vanguard back towards the wall of their heavy armour. He looked up to the sky, and through the interweaving beams he saw the drop pods hurtle to the ground, coming down behind the Mechanicus forces, between them and the Tharsis Gate, catching them in a vice. Thane heard the impacts, felt the shake in the pavement. He felt the pressure mount on Van Auken.

The disaster, when it happened, seemed inevitable, an event every soul on Mars should have predicted. Thane saw it unfold with sickened dread and helplessness. Two of the Dunecrawlers rotated their hulls to send their fire over the drop pods. They did so as the last of the entry vehicles came down a few seconds behind the others. What happened was chance, not error. The terrible alchemy of war.

Because this was war. It had been from the moment Koorland ordered the *Alcazar Remembered* to Mars.

An eradication beam struck the final drop pod. It vaporised the outer shielding. The drop pod's retro thrusters exploded. Thane saw the flash, the billow of flame, and the pod tilt over. Off course, it fell to the east beyond his sight, behind the canyon walls of the manufactoria. The crash of its landing was deafening.

'Hold fire!' Thane ordered. '*Hold fire!*' The company obeyed, but he didn't know if the Fists Exemplar in the fallen pod were alive, and if they were receiving. The proximity and intensity of the energy beams was interfering with vox-traffic. The voices of his brothers were disappearing in storms of static and dropped audio. He heard nothing from the damaged pod.

And then there were more explosions. There was bolter fire. A rocket slammed into the hull of a Dunecrawler.

No, Thane thought, despairing. The worst was unfolding. His wounded brothers thought they had come under attack and were responding.

The Mechanicus answered. The Dunecrawlers lowered their guns and fired towards the rear. Overhead, the canopy of destruction descended.

No room to manoeuvre now, no avoiding the worst. No more pretence. No more hope.

'*Open fire!*' Thane commanded.

Fists Exemplar and skitarii struck at each other in the same instant. The close quarters worked in favour of the Space Marines – their armour was stronger than that of the skitarii. Their mass-reactive bolt-shells shattered breastplates and helmets, blowing up the circuitry and flesh within, and the first ranks of the vanguard went down. Radium carbine bullets hammered against Thane's armour, but his plate held against the poisonous rounds. His auto-senses warned of a massive increase in airborne radiation; if he had not been wearing his helm, his skin would already have begun to cook.

The Fists Exemplar had the momentum of the first seconds, but the Mechanicus had the overwhelming numbers. The temptation was to drive forwards while they could, but Thane knew better. The Space Marines could not depend on their power armour to see them through the enemy cohort before the heavy guns came to bear. The wrong push now would be disastrous.

Or more disastrous. He pushed the thought away, focusing on the need to

survive the next few seconds, and to fight for the completion of the mission. He could not afford to consider the wider consequences of what was unfolding.

‘Fall back,’ he ordered the company. ‘Tanks, take the lead. Punch our way through.’ He swept his bolter back and forth as he started to walk backwards. The Fists Exemplar’s hail shattered Mechanicus warriors. Clouds of metal shrapnel erupted. The tanks drew level with the Space Marines. Their cannons roared simultaneously with the shriek of the enemy’s energy blasts. The Predator *Roma’s Cry* blew a hole through the centre of a Kataphron Breacher with its autocannon, and the servitor’s head jerked backwards in a memory of mortal agony. It was avenged a moment later when *Roma’s Cry* was hit by a Destroyer’s plasma culverin and a Duncrawler’s eradicator. Energy crackled. Metal melted and evaporated. *Roma’s Cry* surged forwards, its fate and that of the battle-brothers within already determined. It crushed skitarii beneath its treads before it exploded. The fireball was huge, power plant and munitions destroyed in the same instant. Thane used the wall of flame as cover and moved to the right side of the avenue.

‘On me,’ he called to his brothers. ‘Flank them.’

The tank battle became a firestorm of shells and energy blasts. The explosions were continuous, filling the street. Behemoths of war hurled destruction at each other from ranges no greater than a few dozen metres. The Fists Exemplar moved through a storm of flame, smoke, convulsing energy and whirling shrapnel. The foot soldiers of both forces made way for the tanks, and the vehicles picked up speed. Even at such close range, some shots went wide, devastating the manufactoria on both sides of the avenue. Thane led his company towards a structure that was more avalanche than shelter.

‘Thamarius,’ Thane voxed to the sergeant leading the drop pod landing. ‘What is your situation?’ He called twice more before Thamarius answered, barely audible over the raging interference.

‘The Gate is holding strong, Chapter Master. We’re trying to break through with melta bombs, but it will take time. Our position is vulnerable.’

‘Hold fast, brother-sergeant. We will approach from the eastern flank.’

‘We may need more desperate means to defeat this barrier.’

‘Understood. But we are not there yet.’

If Thamarius answered, his words were lost in the static.

A Kastelan robot loomed out of the smoke. It fired its incendine combustor and a flood of ignited promethium washed over Thane’s company. Raalega took the brunt, the high-powered stream burning through the seams of his armour. It filled his helmet. Flesh and metal turned molten. As he fell, he hurled a krak grenade at the robot, slugging the behemoth’s left foot. The robot staggered, the sudden swing of its gait almost crushing the datasmith at its side. The priest died by bolter fire a moment later but the robot still advanced. Deprived of the guidance of its datasmith, it was governed by the last instructions programmed into it. It would walk and burn all before it until it was destroyed or ran out of fuel.

Bolter fire pummelled the robot. The impacts made it jerk as it walked, but its attack was untroubled. Thane ran through the flame, his heat and rad sensors shrieking red. He stepped around the robot’s heavy tread, wiping burning promethium to clear his vision, and trained his bolter on the barrel of the combustor. The gun burst. Its fuel ignited at once, shot skywards, and blew up the robot’s power pack. Thane jumped back, away from the worst of the incinerating flood. The robot burned in its own life force, stopped walking and slumped forwards, arms hanging limply. Immobilised, it became a metal silhouette in a lake of fire.

The company passed through an archway and into the manufactorium. Two of its huge chimneys had fallen, crushing the upper storeys of the central structure. The Fists Exemplar entered a ruin of iron and rockcrete, the ground level a shattered jumble. Some columns still held up the vaults for a few metres, while others had snapped like bone, and the space between the floor and thousands of tonnes of rubble was less than two metres. Shattered pipes sprayed superheated steam and burning gases through the space. Torn electrical cables as thick as Thane’s arm sparked and twisted like agonised snakes. Forges thirty metres high, cracked open, spilled molten slag across the floor. The manufactorium was a death planet in miniature, and it offered the best route to break through to Thamarius and the interior of Pavonis Mons. The heavy weapons of the Mechanicus could not enter here.

‘This complex is highly unstable,’ Aloysian said.

‘I don’t plan on staying,’ said Thane.

‘And Van Auken could decide to bring it all down on our heads.’

‘More reason for speed. And to keep him distracted.’ Thane voxed the gunship pilots. ‘We must escalate, brothers. Keep the focus of the Mechanicus on the street.’

‘Acknowledged,’ said Preco, from among the answer clicks.

The Thunderhawks screamed over the avenue, unleashing streams of heavy bolter and lascannon fire, and flights of hellstrike missiles. The tank battle raged on. The roar of destruction was unending, the curtain of flame from the explosions impenetrable. Thane led the way through the burning and the wreckage of the manufactorium. The Fists Exemplar climbed over and under rubble, battering their way through iron doors knocked askew in their frames and through walls crumbling under strain. Behind them, collapses multiplied. A mountain was settling over their heads.

They advanced well beyond the level of the Mechanicus’ front lines in the avenue. Thane estimated less than a hundred metres separated them from the final approach to the Tharsis Gate.

There was no resistance.

As they reached an open space whose floor was covered in congealing metal, Aloysian said, ‘Chapter Master, where are the skitarii?’

It was too much to expect all the infantry to be caught up in the struggle in the road. ‘Auspex?’ Thane called.

‘Nothing...’ Kahagnis voxed from midway down the phalanx.

Thane did not like the hesitation. ‘Why are you uncertain?’

‘The readings are erratic. The interference is severe. When we—’

And then nothing descended. Nothing was white noise on the vox, white noise on the optics, and a shrieking howl. Blood filled Thane’s mouth and ears. Pain stabbed into his eyes with the thousand shards of a broken mirror.

Somewhere, there was a hum. It vibrated beneath hearing. It was sharper than a blade.

And then the smell of blood. The smell of butchery.

# TWO

## Terra – The Imperial Palace

The ork moon attacked Terra with its presence. It was blockaded and nothing could emerge, yet its reality alone was enough. It orbited the planet, renewing fear across the globe as the people turned unwilling eyes up to witness every moonrise.

And the High Lords dithered. The High Lords schemed. At the sight of them, gathered on their dais, Koorland's cheek muscles twitched with contempt and anger.

As he walked into the Great Chamber, the Imperial Fist's boots crunched on the powdered marble fallen from the ceiling. Every time he entered the Chamber, he saw less of the space's glory, and more of the damage. It was no less a symbol of the state of the Imperium than it had ever been. Friezes were cracked. The rubble of the collapsed seating tiers had not been cleared away. The fractures in the dome turned the fresco of the Great Crusade into a bitter satire.

The damage to the huge statue of Rogal Dorn was minimal. The primarch was unbowed. He gazed down on the High Lords' dais, and Koorland thought he read disgust in the lines of his face and in the implacable eyes. How could the Praetorian not be dismayed by what the High Lords of Terra had become?

Koorland shared that disgust. But he also shared in the shame. By ousting the Lord Guilliman, Udin Macht Udo, and becoming Lord Commander of the Imperium in his place, Koorland had erased the distance between himself and the High Lords. He was of their number now. Their failures were his too, compounding his others.

The Imperial Fists, gone except for himself. And yes, he had acted, yes, he had united the Successor Chapters. Yes, the sons of Dorn once again stood on the ramparts of the Imperial Palace. But to what end? The ork moon's tumorous presence was still in the sky, a perpetual reminder of the beast that was bleeding the Imperium. The Council was as fractious as ever. And now, instead of progress towards even a hint of a way of moving against the orks, the fault lines in the Imperium were growing into chasms.

A poor showing.

And he had turned the running of the blockade over to the Imperial Navy. The move was necessary. The Last Wall could not be held in one place, unable to turn where the war called. Even so, the decision felt like a bad one.

Koorland mounted the dais and stopped before Kubik. The Fabricator General of the Adeptus Mechanicus was seated. He did not rise. His optics hummed as they adjusted to Koorland's proximity.

'There has been an astropathic message from Mars,' Koorland said. He held a strip of vellum before Kubik. 'Fighting has broken out. But I expect you knew that.'

'The result was calculated at a high level of probability,' Kubik answered. His mantid limbs unfolded, long metallic fingers taking the parchment. He examined it with little interest before returning it to Koorland. 'You are reporting the expected, Lord Commander.'

The others in the room were less sanguine.

'How bad is it?' asked Drakan Vangorich, the Grand Master of the Officio Assassinorum.

Most of the people in the chamber inspired Koorland with contempt, but Vangorich was an exception. If he had been no more successful than Koorland in forcing a consistent, successful defence against the greenskins out of the Council, his efforts had been heroic. Koorland respected him. He was wary of the man, but he trusted his wisdom.

'I have no details yet,' Koorland said. 'I'm waiting on the arrival of vox-transmissions.'

'Mars is currently fourteen-point-two light minutes from Terra,' said Kubik.

'Yes.' Koorland rounded on the Fabricator General again. 'How much

damage will be done in the time it takes for new orders to be sent and received?’

If Kubik was bothered by the implications, he gave no sign. ‘You have sent armed troops onto the sacred ground of Mars,’ he said. ‘Your losses are regrettable.’

‘*Regrettable?*’ Tobris Ekharth shouted. The Master of the Administratum sounded querulous rather than forceful. His outrage was tinged with panic. ‘None of the other Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes have seen fit to trouble themselves with Terra—’

‘The ork attacks are occurring throughout the Imperium,’ Vangorich interrupted, his tone both grim and calm. ‘We have reports of the Ultramarines engaging another attack moon over Tarentus. The Blood Angels—’

‘I don’t care about Tarentus!’ Spit flew from Ekharth’s lips. ‘I care about Terra! And where are our Space Marines? They’re battling the Adeptus Mechanicus! That is not *regrettable*. It is catastrophic! Is this what you call leadership?’ he demanded of Koorland. ‘You have led us into civil war!’

Ecclesiarch Mesring gasped. Inquisitorial Representative Lastan Neemagiun Veritus rose from his seat. ‘Do not use those words again,’ he hissed at Ekharth.

Koorland had difficulty gauging Veritus’ age, but he was old, his body withered inside the bulk of his power armour. His movements had energy, though, and Ekharth recoiled, leaning back as if he could push himself through his throne and away from the inquisitor.

‘The Imperium will never know civil war again,’ Veritus said. His voice was calm, measured, yet it cut the air with claws. ‘That is impermissible. To imagine otherwise is heresy.’

Mesring breathed in sharply again. Cultural memories a thousand years old pressed in on the Great Chamber, casting long shadows.

Trembling, Ekharth said, ‘Then what is it?’

Koorland was surprised the Administratum lord found the courage to push back even that much against Veritus.

‘It is something that ends now,’ Koorland said. He was still facing Kubik.

‘It is a skirmish,’ said Kubik. ‘It will end soon.’ The mechanical buzz of his voice was without intonation. He might as well have been a servitor

reporting data. 'What will you do?' he asked Koorland. 'I do not think you will continue to send troops after the current contingent is rendered non-viable.'

'You have little faith in the Adeptus Astartes,' Koorland said. 'You think you know how this struggle will end? You are wrong.'

'The arithmetic is beyond challenge. One company against an entire planet.'

Koorland shook his head. 'Fabricator General Kubik,' he said, 'planets have fallen to a single company before. Do not mistake this for a skirmish.' He looked at Ekharth. 'And it is not a civil war.'

He paused. He stopped himself before he gave in to his anger. He would have liked to drag Kubik off his seat and batter the insectoid priest. He would have liked to force compliance. There was no telling how much harm the Adeptus Mechanicus had done already with the secrets it was fighting so hard to keep. But such actions would be futile, and they would ensure an even greater tragedy on Mars.

'Fabricator General,' he said, calm now. 'Are you still a High Lord of the Imperium?'

Brother Scuris came apart. He was a few metres to Thane's left. As Thane tried to clear his eyes and head, he had a vague impression of lunging, skeletal shadows that seemed to have emerged from the air itself. They wielded blades and claws, and they cut through Scuris' armour as if it too were a shadow. Scuris' arms fell to the ground. Blood sprayed from his gorget. Up and down the line of the Fists Exemplar, vitae jetted in powerful fountains, the massive hearts of the Adeptus Astartes warrior pumping blood far into the air. It misted the atmosphere of the room.

Thane's vision split, doubled, blurred. He made out a line of hostiles approaching from the far end of the room. There were flashes from gun muzzles and projectiles slammed into Thane's chest-plate. They hit with the stopping power of heavy stubbers. And everywhere there were the rapid shadows of the enemy already upon the Fists Exemplar.

The vox was a ringing howl. Communication was impossible. Defence and retaliation were not. Thane fired, sweeping his bolter in a wide parabola before him. He stepped backwards. He could not trust his agonised senses. He could trust his brothers.

Through the static came the heavy pounding of bolters. Thane's shoulders locked with his brothers'. The Fists Exemplar formed a circle, striking back with a devastating volley. Shells punched into the walls of the manufactory, chewing through the shadows and the advancing foe. Rockets hit the line. The Space Marines struck back at stealth with overwhelming brute force.

The white noise began to break down as the beings generating it were annihilated. Thane's vision cleared. He saw the broken line of the Sicarian infiltrators. With their hemispherical skulls atop bodies whose limbs were narrow articulations long since absent of flesh, they were scarabs of war. They still came forwards, firing stubcarbines, broadcasting neurostatic waves, but the cumulative strength of the neurostatic assault was no longer enough. The genhanced senses of the Adeptus Astartes magnified the damage of the wave. They also adapted faster.

The lethal shadows, too, now had shape. Ruststalkers. The skitarii assassins had the same slender build as the infiltrators. They moved like razors. At close quarters, their transonic blades sliced through ceramite as easily as flesh. Unlike the infiltrators, the hum they broadcast rode up and down the frequencies, finding the vibrations to slip through the molecules of armour and bone.

But they had to get close. The Fists Exemplar pushed the skitarii back with a mass-reactive storm. Enemy bodies burst into shrapnel. Mechanicus warriors disintegrated. Shapes fell to the ground: shapes that looked like warped, metallic ruin, and yet they bled.

'Through them now!' Thane yelled.

He jogged forwards again, still shoulder-to-shoulder with his brothers. The Fists Exemplar became their name incarnate: a massive ceramite fist rushing into the foe, shattering the advance. Infiltrator rounds cracked Thane's breastplate. He was running through hammer blows, but his own blows were harder. His force was unstoppable.

Half-molten slag cracked and shifted and gave way beneath his heavy steps and his boots sank into viscous heat, but he kept his footing. He kept his momentum. The Exemplars were a single entity, a battering ram come to shatter the enemy line.

More infiltrators fell. The stiletto jab to Thane's forehead and the subaural sapping of his spirit itself faded. The vox sputtered back to life

with the roar of the Space Marines' anger. The ruststalkers closed with them, needling in like filaments to a magnet. Some of them danced between the shells. Some of them struck home with their blades. Thane heard brothers' snarls cut short. He also heard high-pitched bursts of squealing binharic as the assassins were taken apart by retaliatory fire.

Thane hurled a frag grenade. The skitarii had little flesh for the shrapnel to pierce, but the blast fountained metal over them, melting joints and incinerating circuits. A ruststalker leaped in front of him, slashing at his helmet with its chordclaw. He jerked his head back. The claws scraped across his grille. With his right arm, he swung his chainsword diagonally down through the assassin's neck, cutting through cables. It severed a cybernetic spine. The ruststalker's head flew off, and Thane trampled over the body.

The Fists Exemplar collided with the infiltrators. They attacked with fury and with sheer mass, turning the Sicarians into scrap metal. The remaining ruststalkers retreated, vanishing back into the shadows.

'Are you still holding, Thamarius?' Thane voxed.

'Barely,' the sergeant answered. He sounded winded. 'Still not through the Gate.'

'We are almost with you.' There was a doorway ahead. Beyond it, a narrow corridor, and the Martian daylight. The end of the manufactorium and a short run to the rear of the Mechanicus lines and the Tharsis gate.

The huge fist kept moving.

'Our losses—' 7-Galliax began.

'Are known and registered,' Van Auken interrupted.

'We have been unable to stop the Adeptus Astartes advance through the Dolentes complex.'

'We are fully aware.' Van Auken's optics skipped from vid-screen to vid-screen, processing the unfolding disaster. Extrapolated results were even grimmer. He had to shut the conflict down and do it quickly. The long-term consequences were as uncertain as the near-future ones were definite. They were also coming no matter what steps he took to stop the Fists Exemplar. There was no peace to preserve now. The political ramifications were beyond his concern. He was sending constant updates to Terra, for the use of the Fabricator General, but whatever Kubik decided had no bearing

on the immediate situation. ‘Reinforcements are arriving,’ Van Auken told 7-Galliax. ‘Expect significant structural and personnel impacts.’

‘Acknowledged. We are the Machine. Let it be inevitable and manifest.’

Short-term collateral losses to the Mechanicus were regrettable. They were also ongoing. The war had to be stopped by a massive concentration of force. Sufficient escalation would stop uncontrollable escalation.

There was pure certainty in the move he had to make. Its success was less certain.

He watched the vid-screens, processing the data of the war he was trying to stop.

He realised he was experiencing desperation.

‘Your query’s answer is self-evident,’ Kubik said. ‘If I were not a High Lord, I would not be present. We would not be having this conversation.’

The Fabricator General’s answer was somewhere between being literal in the most mechanistic sense and an equivocation. Koorland hoped Kubik’s cold evasion was a sign of uncertainty. You still have nerves in there, Koorland thought. I think I struck one.

He pressed harder. ‘Your actions force my question. You have every right and duty to act in the defence of Mars, but not at the expense of the Imperium. We are not two powers. We are one. Or are you really contemplating secession?’

‘The speculation is absurd,’ Kubik said.

Koorland did not expect emotion in Kubik’s voice, so he was not surprised by the flat absence of outrage or passion. What surprised him was the momentary pause. A single metallic finger tapped once against the right arm of the throne. Something Koorland had said had jolted the Fabricator General. He had hit too close to home.

Secession? The Mechanicus wouldn’t be that mad.

And if they were?

Koorland leaned closer to Kubik. ‘What do you think is happening on Mars?’ he asked. ‘What do you think will be the consequences of the path you have chosen?’

‘The Mechanicus does not walk this path alone, Lord Commander. You are the one who sent an armed force to Mars.’

‘You forced my choice. Fabricator General Kubik, there is war on Mars

as we have this debate. Even now the damage must be considerable. It will be worse. If there is no ceasefire, the struggle will continue until there is victory. Think of the cost. Think how far the consequences will reach. Perhaps this will not be civil war.’ He shot a glance at Veritus, who glowered but kept silent. ‘But Mars will be weakened. The Imperium will be weakened. Is that your desire? How much destruction will you embrace?’

No answer from Kubik, except in the tapping of his finger. It marked time, each click of metal on metal the passing of another second, another moment lost to the cascading destruction.

Messengers burst into the Great Chamber from separate doors. One ran straight for Koorland. The other was a Mechanicus acolyte.

Kubik’s finger stopped tapping. His telescoping optics flicked from the approaching acolyte and back to Koorland.

They waited in silence for the news.

More moments lost.

A few metres from the exit of the corridor, Thane halted. At the same instant, Thamarius voxed, ‘Chapter Master! Mechanicus reinforcements!’

‘I see them, brother-sergeant.’

Dunecrawlers – squadron after squadron of them, a swarm of massive arachnid walkers, moving in with a ponderous scuttle into the port area. Their eradication beamers were swinging towards the manufactorium.

‘They will leave nothing but a crater,’ said Aloysian.

Van Auken’s voice resounded across the battlefield. ‘Adeptus Astartes, surrender immediately. You have thirty seconds.’

Thane gestured the company back. He opened a channel to the *Alcazar Remembered*. ‘Shipmaster,’ he said. ‘I need a single bombardment cannon salvo with immediate effect at these coordinates.’

The messages were subluminal reports. As Koorland learned the full details of the battle’s beginning, he received word on the vox of another astropathic communication. It was one whose translation had posed no difficulty. There had been too much urgency in the signal from the choir aboard the *Alcazar Remembered*, the message too brief and simple to permit misunderstanding.

‘An orbital attack has begun,’ Koorland said.

Kubik rose. ‘End it,’ he demanded.

‘That lies with you,’ Koorland responded.

Imperial Fist and Fabricator General faced each other. The seconds ticked by in silence. The rest of the High Lords watched and said nothing. Hundreds of millions of kilometres away, destruction rained from the Martian skies.

The Dunecrawlers turned their beams on the manufactorium. The Fists Exemplar retreated from the disintegrating collapse. Walls evaporated behind them. The upper floors plummeted. The rubble that fell through the beams vanished. Tonnes of rockcrete and iron and plasteel made it through. Thane crouched against the side wall as slabs came down at an angle. Ruin pressed down on the company. He pushed upwards, straining against the weight that sought to crush him. The pressure grew as more and more of the upper structure fell.

‘Stand fast, brothers!’ he called, shouting over thunder. ‘Our retaliation approaches.’

‘It’s getting lighter,’ Kahagnis said.

‘Do not rejoice,’ Aloysian warned.

The shrieking hum of the eradicator beams drew nearer. They were stripping away the layers of rubble. Soon there would be no shelter.

Daylight appeared over Thane’s head.

He roared and turned to face the Mechanicus armour. And so he was in time to see the streak from the sky. The bombardment cannon’s shot struck the centre of the Square of the Infinite Reach. Auto-senses shutting out the glare, Thane crouched in the vanishing ruins. The blast was light and fire and the concentrated wind of a thousand hurricanes. It blew over the Fists Exemplar., who sank into their positions, clutching shattered foundations. Torn and burned fragments of the Dunecrawlers flew overhead, leaves in the wind. The wind still blowing, the glare barely faded, Thane called the charge.

Smoke and dust everywhere. In the avenue, the heavy armour struggle continued, but the Mechanicus forces, closer to the blast, had been decimated. The Space Marine tanks gained ground. Before the Tharsis Gate, there was now a wasteland with a crater a dozen metres deep at its

centre. Its slopes were a landscape of unrecognisable metal fragments and broken stone.

‘Thamarius,’ Thane called as the Fists Exemplar descended the slope.

‘Still here, Chapter Master. Just.’

‘Are you in?’

‘Almost.’

Weylon Kale broke in. ‘Chapter Master,’ said the shipmaster, ‘we are under attack.’

‘How many Mechanicus vessels?’

‘Many.’

Koorland took a step back from Kubik. He spread his arms, taking in the damage to the Great Chamber. ‘Is this what we are coming to?’ he asked. ‘Will we turn the Imperium into a broken, fractured, divided shadow of what it should be? Is this how we honour the Emperor?’ He filled his lungs with air. He filled his being with righteous anger. He bellowed his denial and his loyalty in a single word: ‘*No!*’

The shout reverberated across the Chamber. The High Lords looked at him in silence. He saw terror in some, shame in others. Vangorich gave a slow nod of approval. Something glimmered in Veritus’ eyes and Koorland had the impression it was something like hope. He was surprised to see the old inquisitor was still capable of the emotion.

Kubik was unreadable. He had no face in the human sense. He was perfectly still.

I have your attention, Koorland thought.

He spoke to the High Lords. His voice carried to the seating tiers, to the spectators who still came to the battered room. If the minor lords and functionaries were still jockeying for political favour, their efforts must have been the result of habit rather than belief by this point. Their numbers were greatly reduced. Many had died in the Proletarian Crusade. Others had been too terrified to return in the wake of eldar and orks being present so deep in the heart of the Imperial Palace.

Koorland spoke to be heard by all. But most of all he spoke to Kubik. ‘The Imperium is tested as it has not been since the Emperor ascended to the Golden Throne,’ he said. ‘If we fail this test, we fail through disunity. We fail the trust the Emperor has placed in us. If division defeats us, we

deserve no better. And if we fall, in the name of what? I stand for Terra, and *I stand for Mars*. Because I stand for the Emperor. I stand for the Imperium. I will walk the ramparts of the galaxy, I will repel all enemies. I know my duty.’ He dropped his voice so that only Kubik could hear. ‘Do you?’

The Fists Exemplar melted their way through the final metres of steel, and the Tharsis Gate was breached at last. The passage was just wide and high enough for the battle-brothers to pass through in single file. To the rear, the tanks had broken the last of the Mechanicus lines and were forming a defensive perimeter around the Gate, preserving the egress once Urquidex had been located.

‘Taking fire,’ Kale reported from the *Alcazar Remembered*.

‘How long can you hold them off while remaining at anchor?’ Thane asked, pausing at the entrance to the breach.

‘As long as you need, Chapter Master.’ Kale’s answer was an acknowledgement that there was no choice if the mission was to succeed.

‘Our thanks, shipmaster.’

A new wave of tocsins sounded. The wailing was desperate, the tone final.

Standing at Thane’s shoulder, Aloysian said, ‘They will not let us profane Pavonis Mons. They will destroy the complex with us.’

‘I hope you’re wrong,’ Thane said. But as he spoke, immense turrets rose to the east and west, driven upwards by pistons thick as the limbs of Titans. They supported eradication beamer macro-cannons. With glacial majesty, barrels wider than Thunderhawks began to turn and angle downwards.

Aloysian was right. The Mechanicus was ready to atomise the invaded quadrants of the Pavonis Mons complex layer by layer.

The Predators and Whirlwinds unleashed salvoes of cannon fire and missile flights at the turrets. Void shields flared with the impacts.

Thane voxed Kale as he followed Aloysian down the melted tunnel through the Gate.

‘Shipmaster,’ he said, ‘I need an area-wide bombardment.’

Thane felt the mission goal recede into the mists of war. Closing in was only ever-more terrible destruction.

‘Duty,’ Kubik repeated. The Fabricator General spoke slowly, pausing between the syllables, as if anatomising the word. He stood.

‘I believe in the honour of the Adeptus Mechanicus,’ Koorland said. ‘I believe in its fidelity to the Emperor.’

Another silence. Not a total one. Koorland listened to the clicks and whirs and electronic humming of Kubik’s form. He imagined he was hearing the sounds of indecision, of logic circuits closing to form a pattern of choice.

Kubik said, ‘Your belief is not misplaced. I am cognisant of all my duties.’ His words were as free of human inflection as ever. There was no trace of the organic in their buzzing enunciation.

And they were filled with sudden resolution.

Kubik turned to the Mechanicus acolyte. ‘Priority extremis message: cease fire.’

Koorland tapped his vox-bead, connecting him to the master of the astropathic choir. It was no longer a question of stopping the war in time. The question was whether there was anything left to stop.

‘Target zone acquired,’ Shipmaster Kale voxed from the *Alcazar Remembered*. ‘Firing on your command.’

Beyond the Tharsis Gate, the Fists Exemplar found themselves in a vast structure that was both hall of worship to the Omnissiah and pathway nexus – the Grand Passage of the Fulcrumite. Galleries beyond number rose toward a vault a thousand metres away. A web of maglev tracks, dozens of levels deep, led away in all directions. The main corridor, wide enough for a phalanx of Baneblades to travel down, split in the far distance, with the right-hand branch sloping beneath the surface of Mars. The air was dark with black, oily smoke.

The rockcrete arches echoed with the bone-shaking heartbeat of machinery. The sharp, whistling crackle and thunder of energy discharges would have punctured mortal eardrums. The tocsins sounded here too, and yet the innumerable servants of the Omnissiah continued along their appointed tasks. They moved in their red robes on their insectile limbs, mehadendrites waving, travelling without panic, their goals unaltered by the fates decreed by their superiors.

The order to fire caught in Thane’s throat. He was about to lay waste to a vast region of Pavonis Mons, the explosive destruction easier for the Fists

Exemplar to survive than the absolute, surgical scouring of the eradicator beams. And if the attack took out the turrets, the Mechanicus would come back with an even more devastating attack. The conflict was a firestorm. It was nothing he could stop. It had caught the Fists Exemplar and the Adeptus Mechanicus in its consuming winds, and there was nothing anyone on Mars could do to stop it. All they could do was feed it.

Fire, he thought. But he hesitated again. In the second he had delayed, the turrets had not fired. The towering walls of the Passage were intact. The region had not been stripped down to its component molecules.

Someone else was hesitating.

‘Chapter Master?’ Kale asked.

The Fists Exemplar pounded down the passage. They had no direction to pursue except *down*. The war had no direction except *more*.

But there was hesitation.

Thane had no choice. He had to seize the advantage before Van Auken did. Before the Mechanicus vessels overwhelmed the *Alcazar Remembered*.

‘Fire,’ he said.

But then Kale was shouting something. It took a few seconds for the words to register. ‘Astropathic communication, Chapter Master! Immediate ceasefire! Cease fire!’

The message Thane had abandoned hope of receiving. The message he wished for above all others. And for that reason, he had to distrust it.

‘Authenticate it,’ he said.

‘Authentication in progress.’

He must fight until he knew the order truly came from Koorland. That was his duty.

But Van Auken wasn’t firing either.

He placed his trust in hope. ‘Hold fire,’ he told Kale.

# THREE

## Terra – The Imperial Palace

In the quarters he had taken for himself in the barracks of the Last Wall, Koorland played through the recording of Thane's interrogation of Urquidex yet again. He had already watched it until he had memorised every moment of the encounter. The war had ended before the command to turn Urquidex into a servitor had been carried out, but only just. His left arm was missing. The digits on his right moved only very slightly. His skull bore the scars of preparatory procedures.

But Urquidex spoke clearly. And his words shook Koorland. The first time he heard them, he thought he was dreaming. He replayed the vid-capture, and then did so again. And again, wishing he did not have to believe what was said.

Kubik entered the Cerebrium. Koorland was already there. The Space Marine had chosen the location for their meeting, the room at the top of the Widdershins Tower having been virtually unused since the arrival of the ork moon. Most of the High Lords found the presence of the moon, visible from the casements, too much to bear. The Great Chamber preserved an illusion of security, though that mirage was now badly fractured.

Kubik did not share the same reluctance. He welcomed the chance to observe the ork base. There was always the chance, if the air was clear enough, of witnessing an alteration on its surface, of processing some form of significant data.

Kubik evaluated the stance of Koorland. He was not sitting at the circular table, but standing beside the casement that gave the best view of the ork

moon. The smog was thick this evening, but the glow of the sphere was still bright. It was visible through the cover as a sickly smear. Kubik assessed the chamber and Koorland's position in it as symbolic. This had been Udin Macht Udo's preferred chamber of governance. The empty table, the abandoned room – signifiers of necessary changes. The sight of the moon – a reminder of the need for those changes. Koorland was demonstrating political acumen.

He was also showing Kubik considerable courtesy in keeping the meeting private.

‘I have received the report of Magos Biologis Urquidex,’ Koorland said.

Kubik inclined his head slightly. ‘It is fortunate he survived the hostilities.’ As he spoke, he evaluated his reaction to his own words. A few hours earlier, he had been ready to order Urquidex's immediate termination rather than allow him to release the secrets he knew. Now, he discovered that he was telling Koorland the truth. He was speaking without irony. He was glad the secret was out. Its weight had been greater than he supposed. This was surprising, and required finer parsing.

‘The Adeptus Mechanicus has been attempting to replicate the ork teleportation technology.’

‘This is so.’

He and Koorland were avoiding the greater subject. They were beginning with something trivial in comparison. The truth was so enormous, it had to be approached gradually.

‘And you have been successful?’ Koorland's tone was neutral. Kubik would have expected anger and judgement. His estimation of the Space Marine grew by another notch.

‘We have,’ he said. ‘We transferred Phobos to the opposite position of its orbit.’

Koorland said nothing for a moment. ‘This is xenos technology,’ he observed.

‘It is.’ He tilted his head. ‘Would you have us discard this possible advantage? Are there means we should not employ to win this war?’

‘I'm glad to hear you are engaged in this battle, Fabricator General.’

And this was indeed so. It was as if there had been static interfering with Kubik's perceptions. He had viewed the struggle against the orks as if it were a sideshow, one that concerned him and the Mechanicus only to the

degree that it provided interesting and useful technology. The outcome had seemed irrelevant.

He had been wrong. The magnitude of his error was disturbing. It was contrary to his sense of identity that he should be capable of a miscalculation so gigantic and so blinkered.

‘The Adeptus Mechanicus has the same interest in the defeat of the orks as the rest of the Imperium,’ he said.

‘What do you hope to achieve with the teleporter?’ Koorland asked.

Kubik had been expecting this question. He had prepared his answer in the same instant he had given the order to release Urquidex into the custody of the Fists Exemplar.

‘The Phobos test is promising, but some considerable distance from the goal. The goal would be to use the weapon of the *Veridi giganticus* against them. We postulate it should be possible to teleport the battle moons away, possibly destroying them in the process.’

Koorland raised his eyebrows. ‘That is very promising.’

‘We are very far from this achievement. The mass of Phobos and the hostile bodies is not comparable, and the distance Phobos was transported was negligible.’

He was feeding Koorland a mixture of truth and outright lies. The limitations he described were accurate. The goal was not. There was no sign that the range of the device could reach beyond the near orbit of the astronomical body on which it was based. To teleport the ork moon away, it would be necessary to install the instrumentation on its surface. What had been constructed on Mars spanned many kilometres. To be used elsewhere, it would have to be transported in massive sections and rebuilt. Such a project would be difficult enough without being attempted in a warzone. And not only was the machine incomplete, it had not been duplicated. It must remain on Mars. Kubik would not compromise the means of the planet’s escape from the Sol System.

And yet.

He spoke the lies, and it was difficult to do so. He caught himself beginning to speculate about other possible uses for the technology, ones that did not involve the escape of Mars. He detected a sensation in his chest that had been so long unfamiliar to him that he did not recognise it at first.

It was regret. He was conflicted. The uncertainty was new, and distressing. Since his ascension from the limitations of the flesh, his being had been defined by a perfect focus and a precision of purpose. Now the phantoms of his shed humanity were reaching for him, summoned by Koorland and the fact that Kubik's allegiance could *not* be reduced to Mars alone.

If Koorland doubted Kubik's explanation about the teleporter, he gave no sign. He was more concerned with the other truth.

The time had come to speak of it.

'Ullanor,' Koorland said.

The word hung in the air like the toll of a great bell.

'Yes,' Kubik said.

'The origin point of the greenskin invasion is Ullanor.'

'Yes,' and though he had known for some time, Kubik could manage no more. The truth punched through the protective coldness of the machine to the human core he retained. The world belonged to a realm other than mere reality. It was a legend. It marked the pinnacle of the Imperium's glory, and the origins of its tragedy. It existed as a myth. It should not exist as a destination. And the thought of it being overrun by greenskins was beyond obscene. It was absurd, a fever dream.

'There is no doubt?'

'None.'

Kubik wished there were, and he knew Koorland did too.

Koorland sighed. 'You must have known what we must do. Why keep that information secret?'

'We keep secrets very well in the Adeptus Mechanicus. It is a vital skill. Necessity has made it into a way of life.'

'You mean you are now secretive by instinct.'

'Instinct is foreign to the machine,' Kubik said. 'It is more accurate to say that secrecy is our default condition.'

'You have not yet answered my question.'

'The secrecy was subject to ongoing evaluation. Revelation depended on many variables. The progress of efforts against the *Veridi*. Visible levels of determination within Imperial forces and leadership. The means to act.' All of this was accurate, but there was more. The retreat into cold evaluation had also been an attempt to turn away from the import of the

truth. ‘Query, Lord Commander – what will be the effect of the propagation of this knowledge?’

Koorland grimaced. ‘Turmoil,’ he said.

Kubik opened his right hand, spreading his multi-jointed fingers wide, suggesting the spread of disorder. ‘A site of such significance become home to the xenos invader. The populace will not receive the news calmly. Nor can one expect the information to remain within the circle of the High Lords.’

‘True,’ said Koorland.

‘I do not believe the rest of the Council will react well.’

‘You are correct. But there comes a point where secrecy serves no purpose. The truth must be confronted.’ Koorland gestured to the casement and the glow of the ork moon. The light of Terra’s fall spread over the roofs and spires of the Imperial Palace, a slick the colour of bleached bone, and of final defeat. ‘The truth confronts us, after all. Relentlessly.’ The Space Marine’s face twisted in hate and horror.

Kubik’s cool fascination with the base had crumbled. It can end us all, he thought. The *Veridi* can end everything.

Kubik inclined his head once more. ‘Do you have the determination to take the course of action this information dictates?’

‘I do.’

‘And the means?’

‘Not yet.’

Koorland thought about the means. He thought about the path he must walk. The thoughts were painful. They were reminders of what he had lost, of the burden he had shouldered, and of his own unworthiness and presumption. It was arrogance enough to put himself at the head of all the Imperial Fists Successor Chapters. The course upon which he was preparing to embark was sheer hubris.

But he had no choice.

He remained in the Cerebrium long after Kubik had departed and thought through his next steps. When he doubted, he looked out at the moon, and at the empty round table in the centre of the chamber: the adversary and the absent leadership. He was still there when word reached him over the vox that the *Alcazar Remembered* had returned and made low anchor over

Terra.

Koorland made his way from the Cerebrium to the space port beyond the Daylight Wall. On his orders, the ceremonial purpose of the space port had been discarded. Reserving the facility for the most privileged dignitaries was pointless, now that orks had walked its rockcrete landing pads. Koorland was more interested in the time saved by having his officers reach him in the most efficient way possible.

The Thunderhawk *Honour's Spear* touched down with a surge of retro thrusters. Thane pulled back the side door and jumped out. He had worked on his armour during the return from Mars, and it was clean again, shining in the arc lights of the space port. There had not been time yet to repair all the damage, though – it was pitted and scarred from the conflict at Pavonis Mons. Koorland eyed the marks of fire and thought: We have done this to each other. The Imperium fought itself. Are the orks laughing? They must be.

‘Chapter Master Koorland,’ Thane said when he reached Koorland. He crossed his arms, slamming his hands against his chest-plate in an aquila salute.

‘It’s good to see you, Chapter Master Thane,’ Koorland returned.

‘I had my doubts that we would meet again,’ said Thane.

‘Understandably.’

They walked back towards the Daylight Wall.

Thane said, ‘I wish the mission had resulted in information that was less grave.’

‘It is information that we can act upon. So we are better off than we were before.’

‘The *Interdictor* and its escort are still unaccounted for?’

‘As is the information they carry, yes.’ The Black Templars had learned something that could be used against the orks, but Koorland had to face the real possibility that the knowledge had been lost to battle or the warp.

Thane nodded. ‘There is something else I must tell you.’

‘Yes?’

‘I hesitated.’

‘When?’

‘Moments before the order for the ceasefire came. I was about to call down a full orbital bombardment.’

‘I’m grateful you did hesitate.’ Koorland spoke with feeling. It was important Thane believe him.

Thane seemed unconvinced. ‘The day was saved by chance. The battlefield conditions dictated immediate action. I did not take it.’

‘And you would feel you had done your duty, if we were left with nothing to salvage on Mars and a growing war with the Mechanicus?’

‘Of course not. But the principle remains.’

They walked down a vast colonnade, their boot steps echoing off marble. Above them, for hundreds of metres, were layers upon layers of galleries. Guards in the livery of the Lucifer Blacks stood to attention as they passed.

‘No son of Dorn should owe his victory to luck,’ Thane continued.

‘Perhaps not,’ said Koorland. ‘But it is mere chance that I am alive. It could easily have been one of my brothers. Or none of us. Your hesitation served us well. Relentless advance is not enough in the battlefield, you know this as well as I. Sometimes we have to listen to our instincts. The disorder of war demands that we adapt and improvise. I take it you doubt your fitness to be Chapter Master.’

Thane looked ahead stonily. ‘Perhaps.’

‘I think the complete absence of such doubts is simply arrogance.’

Now Thane’s lips creased in a grim smile. ‘High Marshal Bohemond would disagree.’

‘Quite possibly. The fact remains that you made the right decision, and averted a greater disaster. Accept your victories, brother. We need them.’

Thane nodded. Koorland wasn’t sure if he was convinced, but he seemed content to let the matter drop for the moment. ‘And what do we do with what we have discovered?’

‘We go to Ullanor.’

Thane’s intake of breath was sharp. He must have known what I would say, Koorland thought. Just as he had known what he would say in response to the question Thane was bound to ask. Speaking that sentence, though, giving voice to the thought, made him realise the immensity of what he was contemplating.

*We go to Ullanor.*

Those words should have been inconceivable. But so was the ork occupation of the world. And so Koorland had to confront an impossible

reality with an impossible act.

‘If that is where these orks are coming from, we are not in a condition to bring the battle to them,’ said Thane.

‘I know. We can’t go alone.’

He said nothing else until they reached their destination. Outside the chamber of the astropathic choir, other warriors of the Last Wall waited. Daylight, Eternity, Absolution and Hemisphere – once of the Fists Exemplar, the Black Templars, the Crimson Fists and the Excoriators, now they saluted Koorland as their new Chapter Master. They were a union come to support the summoning of an even greater one.

‘Thank you for attending, brothers,’ he said. The words were inadequate, but there were none equal to the gratitude he felt. He had lost his Chapter, yet another, equally his, had come into being.

‘The step is necessary,’ Hemisphere said.

‘That won’t make it popular,’ said Koorland.

‘Ah,’ said Thane. ‘I see.’

‘Wait for me,’ Koorland said to the five Space Marines. Then he pulled open the bronze doors, and went inside to begin the impossible act.

The ork moon was in orbit over Tarentus, circling closer. Gravity storms shook the agri world. From the huge maw of the battle moon, greenskin landing ships poured in an unending cataract. They descended through Tarentus’ atmosphere, met from the ground with volleys of skyspear surface-to-air missiles launched by Hunter battle tanks. They were challenged in the air by flights of Xiphon interceptors. In the near orbit, the fleet hurled its fury at the moon. It was the largest gathering of Ultramarines vessels in the living memory of the brothers of the Chapter.

They were holding the ork invasion, but only just. Greenskins were making landfall, but they had not broken out into the wider regions yet. However, the gravitic effects of the moon were disrupting everything the Ultramarines threw at it. They had fought the orks to an eroding stalemate, and the orks had the numbers and resources on their side.

On the bridge of the battle-barge *Caracalla*, Chapter Master Odaenathus watched the sear and flame of the war through the oculus. His fists were closed tight. He was holding the thought of defeat at bay. Unless he was able to shift the conditions over Tarentus in dramatic fashion, the

conclusion that faced him was unavoidable. There would be no surrender, but the fate of the Imperial Fists haunted his thoughts. The unthinkable had already transpired.

And the parchment in his right fist announced it was about to happen once more.

‘Chapter Master, I have Captain Macrinus for you,’ said the Master of the Vox.

‘Private feed,’ Odaenathus said. He stepped back from the rail overlooking the bridge, moving deeper into the strategium. He kept his eyes on the oculus as he tapped the bead at his gorget. ‘Brother-captain,’ he said, ‘you have heard the call from Terra.’

‘I have, Chapter Master, but I’m not sure my astropaths have interpreted it correctly. Ullanor?’

‘The reading of my choir is the same. There is no mistake. Captain Macrinus, you are ordered to disengage immediately and make course in the *Chalcedon* for Terra.’

Macrinus hesitated. ‘Can the situation here afford the loss of a strike cruiser?’

In answer, a gravitic stormwave struck the *Caracalla*. A fist shook the massive ship and the hull shrieked. The bridge yawed back and forth. The artificial gravity fought for stability in the violent flux, as mortal serfs and servitors fell from their seats, skidding across the deck. A small gravity blister appeared on the starboard wall. Metal domed and burst upwards, catching a servitor and tearing its body apart.

Odaenathus stood firm. He felt his ship’s pain, and he also felt its anger. ‘Shipmaster!’ he called.

‘Reversing course!’

‘Maintain fire,’ Odaenathus said. ‘Keep them busy taking down our ordnance. Some may yet get through.’ To Macrinus he said, ‘Your absence will be hard. But the Ultramarines were late coming to the aid of Terra once. It will never happen again.’

‘It will not,’ Macrinus agreed. ‘So ordered, Chapter Master. We leave for Terra. Courage and honour.’

‘Courage and honour, captain.’

The *Caracalla* groaned again as another wave hit. The departing strike cruiser left a gap in the barrage. The ork weapons reached through it,

lashing at the fleet.

‘Take us back, shipmaster,’ said Odaenathus. ‘Pull back but keep hitting.’

Ullanor, he thought. The name sounded in his thoughts like a cathedral bell. The echo of history was a dark one. He hoped he was not listening to a death knell.

The *Caracalla* rang once more, struck as by the hammer of a god.

The Ultramarines. The Dark Angels. The Space Wolves. The Blood Angels. Koorland had called them all.

No, he thought. You did more than call. You summoned.

He was walking with Drakan Vangorich. After Koorland had spoken to the High Lords again, he and the Grand Master had climbed the seating tiers until they reached the gallery beneath the dome. Some of its columns had fallen. The floor was uneven and fissured, but its path around the circumference of the Great Chamber was still complete. No falls of rubble forced them to turn around.

‘I assume this is about the call to the other Chapters,’ Vangorich said.

‘Yes. I know you’ve been working hard to make the Council respond with something like sense to the crisis.’

‘You’ve seen what success I’ve had. None.’

‘You have an understanding of the problems, though. Of why there is no unity.’

Vangorich nodded. ‘Too many egos. Too many agendas. Too many leaders, and too many of them weak. Their weakness infects the whole. Everyone struggling for supremacy, even when the situation makes that struggle an act of madness, even when we all know better. You were right to unseat Udo. The Council needs a clear leader. You can see the benefit already. You brought Kubik around.’

‘And what happens when I am not here?’

‘A reversion to form.’ Vangorich sounded disgusted. ‘Your influence won’t last without your presence, I’m afraid. You’ll be leading the attack on Ullanor, of course?’

‘Of course,’ he said, the words sharp with doubt.

‘You don’t think you should?’

‘My position is already one based on great presumption. I pronounced myself leader of the united Successor Chapters of the Imperial Fists,

declaring my right to command other armies when I am the only one of mine remaining. Now I propose to do the same for the sons of other primarchs. The overreach is stunning, isn't it? And I don't even know if the call will be answered.'

'I think it will be.' Vangorich paused. 'Might I offer some advice?'

'I'll be pleased to hear it.'

'Leadership is symbolic as much as anything else. You are not leading the united Successors despite being the last Imperial Fist. You are leading *because* you are the last.'

'I doubt that will be enough to sway the Space Wolves.'

'It won't,' said Vangorich. 'You will have to grow your symbolic worth.'

'Is that all?' Koorland looked between the columns, at the vast space to the floor below. I am elevated beyond my station, he thought. He had sought to ease Thane's doubts while his own had been gnawing at him with greater and greater force. He was not a politician. He belonged in the battlefield. And now he was proposing to invade a legend, at the head of a coalition he had no claim to command.

'I know,' said Vangorich. 'Simple enough, isn't it?'

Koorland grunted. He stopped walking. He gazed on the dais below. Twelve thrones, twelve competitions. He had, for the moment, beaten the High Lords' attempts to co-opt him to their own ends. He wished he could say he had risen above them. He saw himself in one of the thrones, a small figure, dwarfed by the space of the Chamber, insignificant in the eyes of the colossal beings depicted in the fresco above him. 'Thank you, Grand Master,' he said to Vangorich. 'What I have to do is clear.'

'If not how to do so. I'm familiar with that burden. You have my sympathies and my hopes, Lord Commander.' Vangorich walked away.

*Lord Commander.* The title grated each time he heard it. It was a grimy necessity. *Chapter Master* was better, even though it had come to him drenched in tragic irony. *Master of a Chapter of one.*

There was more than one, now. The Last Wall was a reality. The title did not fit as ill as it once had. He still doubted it would be enough.

Movement to his left. He turned his head. A shadow approached, then resolved itself as Lastan Veritus stepped into the light coming between the pillars from the Chamber. 'I don't have to ask if you overheard,' Koorland said.

‘It is my duty to do so.’

Koorland bit back a retort. He would not give the inquisitor anything to use for his own purposes. ‘What do you want?’

‘I have made clear my concern that the attention given to the struggle against the orks is distracting us from the battle against the true enemy.’

‘Abundantly so.’ He controlled his temper. ‘I find it curious to consider a force capable of destroying an entire Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes a *distraction*.’

‘I have not come to argue. I concede that the ork occupation of Ullanor is troubling in the extreme. The threats may be more entwined than I suspected.’

Now Koorland fought to master his surprise at the conciliatory tone.

‘Ullanor,’ Veritus repeated. His ancient face creased in pain. ‘The gravity of this...’ He trailed off.

‘Words are inadequate,’ said Koorland.

‘They are. I agree with your course of action, Chapter Master. You were right to send the call. But you are planning to attack a myth.’

‘I am.’

‘Maintaining unity of purpose and of force will require leadership the equal of the task. Only a myth can conquer a myth.’

‘I am well aware that I am no myth. Do you propose to make me one?’

‘No.’

‘Then I fail to see the point of this conversation. There is no myth to lead us.’

‘You are wrong. There is one.’

‘Oh?’ Koorland was sceptical. ‘Does this myth have a name?’

‘He does. Vulkan.’

The dome of the Chamber began to spin. Koorland shifted his stance to steady himself. He looked up. There in the frozen image of the Great Crusade were the figures of the loyal primarchs. He saw Vulkan, hammer upraised. Reality was turning fluid. In his mind’s eye, Vulkan descended from the fresco, called into being by Veritus.

*Ullanor. Vulkan.* The names of a cataclysmic past. Names that had been legends for a millennium. But one already had re-emerged into lived history.

Koorland focused his gaze on Veritus with effort. By invoking myth, the

old man seemed to have moved into its realm. He was less real, and more formidable. There were immense depths here, to be approached with extreme caution.

‘And where will I find him?’ He had no doubt Veritus would have an answer.

‘On Caldera. Fulfilling an ancient oath.’

## FOUR

### Across the Imperium, Caldera

The warp convulsed. It shrieked around the *Sanguinem Ignis*. An agony of non-matter and raging nightmare clawed at the strike cruiser's Geller field. The immaterium attacked with the fury of a wounded beast and the integrity of the field cracked.

'Translating!' Shipmaster Laeca warned. 'Brace, brace, brace!'

'This is no Mandeville point,' said Sergeant Marbas. He steadied himself against the port-side wall of the strategium.

Captain Valefor grasped the command pulpit. 'The immaterium has had enough of us,' he said. On the pict screens that surrounded the pulpit, the cascading runes were angry red. To try to understand the warp was to try to reason with madness. But in jagged brushstrokes the image was forming of a wound in the warp, and the *Sanguinem Ignis* was the target of the immaterium's vengeance.

The translation was brutal. The vessel passed from the unreal to the material in a single, severing blow. Workstations across the bridge burst into flames. A shriek ran the length of the hull, an intertwined cry of the vessel, the warp and the void together. Another scream joined it, coming from the vox-casters, and Valefor knew it for the cry of the Navigator. He felt the jolt of the transition. The shadow of non-being slashed through him and was gone, as if a monomolecular blade had cut him in half, then healed him on the instant.

Reality settled. The scream faded. The bridge was filled with the cacophony of alarms, but there was deeper silence. The engines had stilled.

‘Damage!’ Valefor demanded.

‘Warp drive integrity intact,’ Laeca answered. ‘But power to the engines—’

She was cut off by the thunder of multiple impacts. They hammered the ship even as the auspex officer reported multiple hostiles.

The oculus snapped open. The pict screens adjusted to the new inputs, and Valefor saw what was coming for them.

The *Sanguinem Ignis* had translated in the wake of an ork attack moon. The greenskin base had suffered damage in its journey through the warp. A quarter of its southern hemisphere had been sheared away and an explosion like a solar prominence arced out of the wound. Molten fissures spread over the rest of the sphere. But it was still at war. Immense bays were open on all sides, and the ork fleet emerged in a swarm. Three cruisers were closing with the Blood Angels, their forward guns firing. The shells were huge, dense, and solid. Mass and velocity were all they needed to tear a vessel apart. The *Sanguinem Ignis*’ void shields flared in protest.

A second wave of cruisers was turning to follow the first. With them came a cloud of smaller vessels, insects zeroing in on carrion.

‘The enemy’s injuries are severe,’ said Marbas.

‘But its fleet is intact. Our fight is not here,’ Valefor said. ‘I want a retreat, shipmaster. Engines full. And recharge the warp drive. Gunners, weapons free on the nearest enemy vessel.’

The engines powered up anew. The deck began to vibrate once more as the strike cruiser began its turn. The view in the oculus shifted with majestic slowness. The blunt-prowed, brutal predators closed, their fire crossing paths with that of the Blood Angels. A cross-hatching of destruction lit the void.

‘The greenskins might repair that moon,’ Marbas said.

‘They might,’ Valefor agreed. ‘I know we stand a chance of destroying it, brother-sergeant. I also know the price we would pay.’

Ork shells pounded the starboard hull. A void shield collapsed.

‘Launch bay five destroyed,’ a servitor intoned.

The screen on Valefor’s right began to list casualty reports.

Marbas joined Valefor beside the pulpit. ‘We are paying a price now.’

‘I have no doubt we will pay more. Our duty is to reach Terra. Our

sacrifices must be to that purpose. Sanguinius made his ultimate sacrifice there. Our duty and our tribute call us there in turn.'

The *Sanguinem Ignis* gathered momentum. Valefor eyed the pict screens. He felt the fires racing down the corridors as if his own veins were burning. We do not end here, he thought. Not here, in the void between systems, cut down by a wounded enemy, in an encounter with no strategic meaning.

Sacrifice must have meaning. Hope for more was a luxury the Blood Angels had banished long ago. But they would not accept less.

The oculus image adjusted as the *Sanguinem Ignis* turned its back on its pursuers. Its torpedoes punched through the prow of the lead cruiser. The massive head of the beast appeared to swallow the explosions. Metal swelled, and chain reaction blasts burst through plate dozens of metres thick. The front half of the ork vessel became a volcanic eruption. Its engines drove it onwards into its own conflagration. A roiling comet of plate and incandescent gas rushed forwards, as if it would catch the Blood Angels in its expanding death. The other cruisers sailed through the lethal corona. The smaller, lighter ships sped past the behemoths and raced ahead of the *Sanguinem Ignis*.

'Forward perspective,' Valefor ordered.

The oculus blinked, accepting the feed from the bow of the ship. The greenskins were establishing a cordon. Individually, the ships were no match for the *Sanguinem Ignis*. Together, they were a formidable barrier. Their guns unleashed a storm of fire. Brilliant, murderous day came to the void. The Blood Angels answered with a frontal bombardment. Ork ships were vaporised.

More replaced them.

The *Sanguinem Ignis* picked up speed. Guns firing on all sides, it plunged into the gauntlet.

The city was slag. It had once covered half the surface of the moon, a hundred million citizens working the forges of its manufactoria. They were dead now. Habs and industry were gone. There was only an iron cemetery, a field of twisted wreckage and molten shapes that stretched to the horizon. The forms were the death of metal. The ground crunched and rang beneath Asger Warfist's steps. All was black, except for the grey rain

of ash from the sky.

The northern half of Fabrikk was destroyed. There was nothing left here to fight over. But there had never been anything the orks wanted from the start. They had come to destroy. They had come to take the moon.

‘Is this what victory looks like?’ Hakon Icegrip asked the Wolf Lord.

‘I don’t care what it looks like. I care that the enemy never sees it.’

The war had shattered Fabrikk. It was barely more than a ruin orbiting its gas giant. There were still some viable settlements near the southern pole, but their output would never be more than a shadow of what had once been. It would take very little for what small population remained to abandon the moon.

They would not, though. Even if it took force, they would remain. Fabrikk’s true value was not the weapons and vehicles it produced, but its location. It was one of the systems ringing the Eye of Terror, a strategic base that could never fall from the Imperium’s grasp.

The Space Wolves would not allow it.

Asger brought his packs to a slag heap that had once been the lead manufactorium of Fabrikk. They could hear the tramp of feet and the rumble of ork vehicles on the other side. The hunt was almost over.

‘For Russ!’ Asger shouted.

‘For the Wolftime!’ the packs answered.

They stormed over the rise. They descended on the ork horde, and they were fury and claw. They were the wind of Fenris, slashing into the ork flanks. To the south, the gunship attack continued, driving the orks forwards. To the north, Predator cannons held them back. And now Asger cut the enemy in half.

The struggle had worn both forces down to ragged cores of rage. The attack moon in the region was two systems over, the target of multiple Great Companies. The invaders of Fabrikk had left the moon and come in a fleet of cruisers. Their numbers were huge, but they were not unlimited. The orks and the Space Wolves had pummelled each other with orbital bombardments. The front lines had raged back and forth over Fabrikk, until there was nothing left of the city and the forges. All that remained was the battered armies. And now it was time for one of them to be exterminated.

The orks welcomed the Wolves. The two forces clashed as if this was

their first encounter. Savagery met savagery. Asger fired bursts from his bolt pistol in a wide arc as he charged, punching through plate and muscle, crippling and maiming the brutes closing with him. He followed up with the wolf claw on his right fist, slashing throats, disembowelling. The orks pressed in harder, trampling over the bodies of their dead. They were all massive, blunt weapons of muscle and bone. The entire campaign had been against these orks, the largest Asger had ever encountered. Many of them dwarfed him. None were faster. He equalled them in ferocity and surpassed them in hate.

At his sides, Grey Hunters tore into the xenos. Bolter and blade, bolter and blade, the alternating swipes of massive paws. The Space Wolves ripped apart the ork force. The greenskins turned inwards. They rushed to impale themselves on the claws of Asger's attack.

The numbers and the size of the orks worked against them. Everywhere the Space Wolves fired, there was a target. The greenskins could not offer massed fire in return without decimating their own ranks. As the packs tore deeper and deeper into the phalanx, the outermost ork chieftains brought heavy weapons to bear regardless of the cost and the battlefield exploded. Asger moved through fountains of flame and shrapnel and bodies in fragments. He roared, charging faster through the enemy. Directions ceased to have meaning. There was only eruption and blood. He knew the pack moved with him. Information about lost brothers flashed before his retinal lenses. The acknowledgement of loss would come later. For now the deaths were a goad.

Fire in the air. Fire in Asger's blood. He was a blur in armour. He was a maddened beast. His lips were pulled back, his teeth bared for the taste of the blood of prey. He smelled it through the filter of his battle-helm's grille. He smelled butchery.

'Yes, Brother Hakon!' he yelled over the vox. 'This is what victory looks like!'

More fire, cleansing, liquid flame, pouring over the orks. The Space Wolves maintained close formation, tightening it when they took casualties. They were a cohesive blade in the maelstrom of violence. Overhead, the gunships closed in, cannons raking the ground. Asger abandoned himself to the kill, his world reduced to the roar of engines, the smoke of burning flesh and vehicles, the crimson spray of severed arteries.

It ended. The blood ceased to spurt. The smoke began to clear. Thunderhawks came in for a landing, and their engines cut out. Asger stood with his brothers on a field that was as dead as it had been before the battle. When he walked, he stepped on bone as well as slag. Torn flesh was draped over the jagged stumps of foundations.

Now he processed the losses. He whispered the names of the fallen brothers. There were many, added to the even greater list taken by this campaign.

This skirmish.

Adrenaline and rage leaked away. His wounds throbbed. He registered the toll ork shells and blades had taken on his armour. Exhaustion pressed down on his shoulders with the weight of a mountain.

But there was also the message. It had been transmitted during the battle. There had been no time to listen to it. No time to hear the name.

*Ullanor.*

The packs gathered the wounded and the dead. They stood before him, awaiting the next deployment. Asger's exhaustion was mirrored before him in every warrior, yet they were all ready. They knew what he knew. They knew this had been a skirmish.

'Will we be rejoining the Great Wolf?' Hakon asked.

'No. He is sending us to Terra. We are called to gather there, and then to make for Ullanor.'

'Our brothers need us,' Kaden Stormtree protested.

'I know they do,' Asger said. The outcome of the battle against the attack moon was far from assured. The Great Wolf's reluctance to issue the command was clear in the tone of the voxmission.

'Is Terra so helpless?' Hakon was disgusted.

'Our duty is to answer the call, and our duty is doubled,' said Kagen Direfrost. The Wolf Priest stepped forwards, then turned to face the Great Company. 'The true call is to Ullanor. The spirits of too many of our brothers have fallen in the shadow of the times spawned on that world.'

'Perhaps there,' Asger said, 'we will rip out the heart of the Beast.'

He was called away from the bridge. Adnachiell was surprised, but he kept his face neutral. The moment was a poor one to return to his quarters, but that was where the serf said he would receive the communication, and so

the Master of the Fourth Battle Company of the Dark Angels nodded and strode from the bridge. The nod was mostly for the benefit of his brothers, assuring them that they would know what was necessary in due course.

Adnachiel's quarters were monastic. The small chamber was dark, a single lumen globe shining on a desk in one corner. The rest of the space was empty, a place of black stone and meditation. He closed the iron door behind him, strode to the desk, and picked up the vox-unit. It was not linked to the company network. Instead, it had a single line that received transmissions only from other equivalent units on other ships. It was a means of dialogue between Company Masters, and only between them.

Adnachiel thought he knew whose voice he would hear. What surprised him was that he was not speaking to the Grand Master of the Deathwing from the bridge of the *Herald of Night*.

'Master Adnachiel,' said Sachael.

'We are coming to your aid, Master Sachael. We are entering the asteroid belt now. We have your position marked. We will attack from the orks' rear within the hour.'

'No. Reverse course. Do not let the enemy detect you.'

'I don't understand.' The battle-barge *Reprisal* had been cornered by a large ork fleet as it attempted to close with the attack moon nested in the Astorias Cloud. If the system had ever had planets, they were fragments now. The asteroid belt was wide and dense, and mineral-rich. Some of the planetoids were so near to one another that mining concerns had linked them with webs of plasteel, facilitating passage and arresting the chance of collision. The ork gravity weapons had turned Astorias into a killing field. Planetoids smashed into one another. Webs became lethal tethers, yanking the bodies together. The *Reprisal* had attempted to close with the ork station through the maze of Astorias, but it had been caught by the fleet while still on the far side of the system's star. Sachael was holding, but trapped. He had called for aid. The *Herald of Night* had answered.

Now the answer was being refused.

'We have new information,' said Sachael. 'Proceed to Terra. Answer the call for aid. There will be a joint operation.'

'With whom?'

'The request was sent to the Blood Angels, Ultramarines and Space Wolves as well as ourselves.'

‘The Space Wolves.’ Adnachiel liked what he was hearing less and less. ‘Terra,’ he continued. ‘The Inquisition could be involved in that appeal. Its agents are thick as maggots on a corpse on Terra.’

‘We are aware of this, Company Master. But we are called. We will not fail Terra a second time. There is more. The combined forces are destined for Ullanor.’

An ill omen. The past reaching out to the present to carve new wounds. Even so, Adnachiel understood now. Over and above the principles of honour, there was a mystery that could not be ignored. The past was danger and tragedy, but it must be confronted. ‘Is there evidence of any—’

Sachael cut him off. ‘We know nothing of that kind. All we know is that we are going to Ullanor, and this cannot be mere chance. Your vessel is not in combat. You must go.’

‘And you?’

‘We will survive, or we will not. That is not your concern.’

‘The sacrifice of my brothers is always my concern.’

‘Believe me, I have no intention of being such a sacrifice.’

‘I believe you, Grand Master.’

Sachael broke off. Just before the connection ended, Adnachiel heard the grumble of blasts in the background, and a sound like a heavy wind.

Fire.

He returned to the strategium. He gave the orders for the new course. And he told his command squad of their destination. None of his brothers said anything. There was no need. The significance of Ullanor was enough.

As the *Herald of Night* veered off from the Astorias Cloud, the Master of Auspex picked up inbound hostile squadrons. The strike cruiser had been detected.

Good, Adnachiel thought. If he had to fight his way out of the system, he might draw enough of the enemy to ensure there would be no sacrifice.

Not yet.

The Imperium came to Caldera. Koorland and the Last Wall were aboard the *Alcazar Remembered* with Thane’s veterans. Flanking the Adeptus Astartes vessel were two of the Imperial Navy’s grand cruisers, *Absolute Decree* and *Finality*. Their troop holds carried regiments of the Lucifer Blacks. There were other regiments too, patchwork commands made up of

the remains of the Orion Watch, the Jupiter Storm, the Granite Myrmidons, the Auroran Rifles, and more. They were the reserves of the Imperial Guard regiments that had been left behind at the time of the Proletarian Crusade. Their comrades had died in humiliation and futility. Koorland's mission offered the possibility of restored pride as well as the hope of a myth. The reserves still on Terra were little more than a token now. It would be up to the Imperial Navy, led by Lord High Admiral Lansung's battleship *Autocephalax Eternal*, to hold off an invasion.

On the bridge of the *Alcazar Remembered*, Thane said, 'Your thoughts appear troubling.'

'I'm thinking about an attack in our absence.'

'You don't like the odds of the High Admiral fighting it off?'

'Do you?'

Thane grimaced.

The *Autocephalax* had become a symbol of failure and tragically empty gestures. Imperial Navy reinforcements had arrived in force. Koorland respected the power of the vessels shielding Terra. But he knew what the orks could do.

There had been little time to make repairs to the *Alcazar Remembered*. The *Decree* and *Finality* bore scars too, as did their escorts. But there were many vessels in the fleet that were undamaged. They had come from Mars, a gigantic mobilisation ordered by Kubik. The scale had pleased Koorland, and also taken him aback. Kubik had been eager to send the Mechanicus to Caldera, and Koorland wondered if he should read a desire for redemption in the Fabricator General's rush to cooperate.

Pict screens lit up with data on the enemy dispositions. The attack moon was visible in the oculus, surrounded by ork vessels except for the face it showed to the planet. Another large fleet was positioned some distance from the moon and was sending landing ships down. Koorland watched the distant flares of engines descending to the atmosphere. That, he thought, is what the process of infection looks like. He burned to purge the disease from Caldera.

We can't, he reminded himself. Keep focused. We are here to find the myth. All this strength is so we can accomplish that single task.

'Auspex,' Thane called from the command pulpit, 'any traffic from Caldera?'

‘It’s fragmentary, Chapter Master,’ said the officer. ‘Short bursts and lots of static. Nothing coherent, but there are attempts. The interference is severe.’

‘It would be,’ Koorland said. He was looking at what the moon was doing to the planet.

‘Yes,’ Thane agreed. ‘Is that what happened to Ardamantua?’

‘No. This is different. So is that moon.’ It looked misshapen, even by the crude standards of the greenskins. It was not a sphere. It was a thick crescent.

Thane ordered a magnification on the planet’s agony.

The moon lashed Caldera with gravity whips. The atmosphere below it was a boiling cauldron of red and black and grey. Huge masses emerged from the storm and rose towards the moon.

‘Are those mountains?’ Thane asked.

‘They might be,’ said Koorland. ‘They are now.’ He followed the flight of one of the rock formations. It slowed as it approached the moon, then merged with the larger body. Now the shape of the moon made sense. It was incomplete. The orks were building their battle station by yanking up chunks of Caldera’s crust.

‘If we could destroy it before its construction is complete...’ Thane muttered.

‘Yes,’ said Koorland. ‘If we could. If we would not expend our strength in doing so. Destroying that moon would be a diversion. One we had fallen into. It would do nothing for the wider war. It would not get us to Ullanor.’

‘Agreed. So where does the search begin?’

Koorland thought for a moment. Then he asked the auspex operator, ‘Is there any pattern to the traffic you are detecting?’

‘Most of it is concentrated near the capital, Laccolith.’

‘What are you thinking?’ Thane asked.

‘Orbital defences are down. The orks have a free hand here.’ He moved to the strategium table. It displayed a hololithic map of the eastern hemisphere of Caldera. ‘Laccolith is very close to being beneath the secondary ork fleet.’

Thane joined him. ‘But not directly.’

‘No, which is odd. And there are still signs of life, however slight.’

‘I’ve never known the greenskins to leave anything functioning in a

population centre they attacked.’

‘Exactly. This is anomalous.’

‘And so as good a starting point as any,’ Thane concluded.

Koorland pointed to the ships launching the landings. ‘That is our target. Punch through and make our own landings, disabling the ork invasion in the process.’

‘That will buy us some time to search.’

‘So I hope.’

Koorland turned from the display to the oculus, and watched the orks steal the being of a world. The scale of the engineering feat was staggering. It was only right that a legend should exist on a world where the impossible was already at play.

‘Is this channel secure?’ Egon Broumis asked.

‘Yes,’ said Illaia Groth. ‘I’m taking this in my quarters.’ The captain of the *Finality* sat at her desk and watched the hololithic representation of her counterpart on the *Absolute Decree*. The image jumped and flickered, but she could read the worry on Broumis’ face well enough. He was a few years older than she was, but his greying, jowled features were misleading. He looked like a well-fed Administratum official. There was little to suggest he was the veteran of dozens of engagements, but Groth had served as his lieutenant before achieving her own command of the *Finality*. She knew what Broumis was worth. It was out of respect for him that she had consented to take this communication without the admiral’s knowledge.

‘What do you think of Rodolph?’ said Broumis.

Zdenek Rodolph, the admiral in command of the Imperial Navy fleet escorting the Adeptus Astartes mission to Caldera. Younger than either Broumis or Groth. The son of privilege and the ward of powerful connections, Lord High Admiral Lansung not least among them. He had reached his rank with less than a quarter of the field experience of the captains. And now he had been picked by Lansung to lead the Navy on this endeavour.

‘Too early to tell.’ Groth shared Broumis’ concern. ‘We haven’t seen him tested.’ She shrugged. ‘He knows his way around a bridge.’

‘I’m not reassured. This crucial mission is in the hands of an untried

politician.’

Groth’s concern took another direction. ‘What are you thinking?’

Broumis hesitated. ‘That we may have to be prepared... to take extraordinary measures.’

‘That’s mutiny.’

Broumis shook his head. His image broke up, then re-formed. ‘That’s not my intention. But if he leads us to disaster, we have to be ready, even if we’re executed for the actions we take. This is too important.’

‘The decision isn’t ours to make.’

‘Do you trust the judgement of the people who did make it?’

Groth said nothing.

‘I’m not suggesting you walk onto the bridge and shoot him,’ said Broumis.

‘Good.’

Broumis sighed. ‘All I’m asking is that we remain watchful. That we act as the battle and the needs of the mission dictate.’

Groth looked off to the side. ‘I should be on the bridge.’

‘Will you think about what I said?’

‘Oh, yes,’ she said. ‘That I can guarantee.’ She ended the communication before Broumis could ask her what she meant.

She would not have been able to answer.

The Imperial attack began with a single shot, long before the ork fleet came within conventional range. It was made by a weapon the battle-barge had been modified to contain. The hull of the *Alcazar Remembered* hummed as the coils of the weapon’s gravimetric impellers charged. The gun was the length of the ship. The projectile was the size of a Titan. The battle-barge’s enginarium corps struggled to maintain even a minimum of stable power to the ship’s vital sectors. The strength of the void shields dropped. Across the bridge, every pict screen except those at the weapons station went black. Aloysian was in the enginarium, appraising Thane of the ship’s condition second by second. The weapon would be dangerous to use if the *Alcazar* was undamaged. Firing it now was madness.

Everything about this war is madness, Koorland thought. If our acts must be too, let their madness be a grand one.

Even this weapon could not pierce the protection the orks generated

around the moon. But their fleet was vulnerable. Any ship was vulnerable.

The hum became a tremor. A spine-knotting whine grew. Koorland felt the entire ship reduced to a single purpose. There was nothing but the gun, nothing but the shot.

‘Now,’ Thane said.

The nova cannon fired. As the shell travelled the length of the barrel, it accelerated to near the speed of light. Its kinetic energy built up to a level defying measure. It shot out of the *Alcazar Remembered*. At the moment of recoil, power failed across the ship for a full second. The bridge went dark. Koorland waited in the blackness, picturing the flight.

The hull groaned as the ship snapped back to its normal state. Power returned. Vox-casters sprang to life with competing damage reports.

In the oculus, a star screamed through void towards the orks. The *Alcazar* had fired less than a single light-minute away from the fleet but the greenskins had detected the arrival of the Imperial ships. Some of the cruisers were pulling out of low orbit to meet the challenge. However, the formation was still concentrated.

Devastation was an art. The timing of the warhead’s detonation was crucial. Caldera was in the line of fire, and the blast would devastate the surface if it went off too late. The nova cannon was not a weapon suited to precision.

Aloysian had taken charge of the arming. He promised accuracy. Thane trusted his judgement, so Koorland did too.

The star flashed into the centre of the ork fleet, and then there was light, the light of creation’s birth and death, the light of a pure and searing end. It filled the oculus. Filters shielded the bridge from its full power, and still Koorland’s lenses snapped shut. They opened again after a few moments, and the light had become the fury of a sun. The shockwave travelled back through the Caldera System, striking the approaching Imperial fleet. It hammered void shields. The *Alcazar Remembered* shook with the thrum of its passage.

The raging sun became a fireball thousands of kilometres in diameter. The light faded to red and its effects became visible. The ork vessels at the centre of the blast had vanished. Others were reduced to fragments. Giants tumbled through the void, dark shells lit only by the pulse of internal explosions. One cruiser seemed to be intact and still moving to engage the

Imperial force. As Koorland watched, its bow and stern halves separated, drifting off into the darkness. Other ships still had power. They tried to escape the fireball, dying before they emerged from its reach.

The fire dissipated, leaving a dull glow behind. It backlit a cemetery of colliding fragments and massive tombs. There was no counting how many smaller ships had died.

It was a blow that had broken entire enemy navies. Here, it left behind an armada. Haloed by flame, venting gases, bristling with ballistic anger, the orks left the orbit of Caldera. They came on in a single, massive wave.

They encountered a storm of Imperial torpedoes launched in the wake of the nova cannon. The fleet from Terra formed a wide spear tip, leading with the *Alcazar* and the grand cruisers. The Mechanicus vessels spread out on either side. Lance and cannon fire streaked towards the orks. Even clustered, they covered a wider area. But the line had thinned.

The two forces closed, running into the teeth of each other's weapons. Evasion was pointless. There was only the hope of shields standing up long enough for the spear to punch through the wave.

A massive ork battleship angled in on a direct collision course with the *Alcazar*. Its prow was a battering ram a thousand metres wide and three times as long. The *Absolute Decree* and the *Finality* joined their fire to the battle-barge's. Lance fire, rockets and torpedoes struck the ram. The accumulated blasts wrapped the battleship in flame. It came on, now on course for a head-to-head collision with the *Alcazar*. The three great ships hit it with a fury that could turn hive cities into craters. The ram was solid metal, as dense as a single ingot.

Four Mechanicus vessels, faster but more lightly armoured, pulled ahead of the body of the fleet, flanking the ork ship. Batteries of eradicator beams sheared into the sides of the prow where it fused with the ram.

The barrage of the Imperial ships heated the ram red.

Escorting Brute ram ships, tiny beside the battleship, flew into the Mechanicus vessels. Ork and Imperial ships disappeared, their explosions washing over the leviathan.

Seconds before the collision, the centre of the ram turned white and split. Explosions rocked the battleships further to stern. The entire vessel seemed to swell before Koorland's eyes, as if it were a monster taking a breath before consuming its prey.

The intake of breath never ended. The ship continued to expand, driven apart by the internal pressure. Incandescence outlined gigantic plates. The battleship turned into a dying roar of flame, and the *Alcazar Remembered* plunged into the furnace of its death. The oculus showed nothing but the inferno of an erupting, disintegrating war machine.

The battle-barge emerged. Before it now were only smaller enemy ships, which fell before the *Alcazar's* withering fire. On the sides, the movements of the remaining ork ships became disordered as they tried to manoeuvre for a counter-attack. The vessels changed direction without coordination. There were collisions. Imperial broadsides punished the orks further. The fleet maintained formation, its salvos a continuous, disciplined wave of devastation, radiating outwards. The greenskin vessels, already damaged by the nova cannon, came apart.

The armada disintegrated. It became small packs of minor predators.

‘The main body of the enemy is responding,’ said Thane.

Koorland checked the hololithic display. The lines of projected trajectories were reaching out from the position of the attack moon. Estimated velocities and points of intersection floated next to each line, adjusting every few seconds as new readings came in.

‘They won’t abandon the moon completely,’ said Koorland.

‘They won’t have to.’ The estimated number of ships kept climbing. Already the fleet was almost the size of the one the Imperial ships had decimated.

Koorland compared the estimated time of arrival of the enemy against the time to launch point. The difference was just enough. The Imperial forces would make planetfall before the void war was re-engaged. ‘All landing ships stand by,’ he said. He looked at Thane. ‘Vulkan awaits us.’

The spear had punctured the wave.

# FIVE

## Caldera – Laccolith

The city had suffered catastrophic damage. Many of its towers had fallen. Others canted, ready to topple, or leaned against smaller buildings. A pall of smoke hung over Laccolith. Entire districts had been gutted by flame. Rocket and artillery craters marked the city with the footsteps of monsters. The outer walls had been annihilated. Their traces remained as heaps of rubble dotting Laccolith's perimeter. There was nothing shielding the city from the jungle, and saurian predators roamed the streets.

But the city was more than a shell. Koorland was amazed by what he found. There was still a population prepared to fight. The people had not been enslaved or exterminated to the last soul. They emerged as the Imperial forces established their staging ground in the eastern sector of the city.

The space port was a ruin. The control tower had taken a direct hit from an orbital strike, and where it had stood was the centre of a deep crater which occupied almost a third of the port's area. A small fleet of lighters had been reduced to blackened, twisted corpses. The rockcrete landing zone was pitted with shell impacts and strewn with wreckage, but it had also been built to withstand the tectonic violence of the world. It was still a large, open, relatively level area. It would serve.

Koorland had his command tent set up at the edge of the crater, out of the way of the landers and manoeuvring vehicles. He and Thane met with General Marga Imren of the Lucifer Blacks and Tech-Priest Dominus Alquist Arouar. The Lucifer Blacks made up the largest contingent of the Astra Militarum cohort, giving Imren supreme authority over the

combined Guard regiments. She was visibly uncomfortable in the presence of Arouar. There was little of the Adeptus Mechanicus leader that suggested he was human at all. His body was a collection of multi-jointed limbs and metallic tentacles. His silhouette defied the eye. It recalled an ancient avian, stooped, but moved with the floating, scuttling grace of the arachnid. In her dark uniform, Imren had the rigid posture and cold pride earned by the regiment that supplied the Imperial Palace's honour guard. She was the human at its most disciplined. Arouar was the human at its most absent.

'This position is barely defensible,' Imren said.

She was right. Holding off the natural predators of Caldera was a simple matter. An ork attack would be something else again.

'We are not here to defend Laccolith,' Koorland said. 'This is the point from which we launch our assault, and that will be as soon as we have a target.'

'The strategy of the *Veridi giganticus* is puzzling,' Arouar said. His voice box clicked and whistled with snatches of binharic. He was poised over the strategium table. It displayed a map of Laccolith, the surrounding region, and what had been recorded of the greenskins' positions during the landings. 'Their behaviour is anomalous.'

'Everything about these orks is anomalous,' said Thane. 'That is their norm.'

'Agreed. However, many of their non-normative actions are unusual because of their advanced technology, considered strategy and intelligent responses. Characteristics strange in the *Veridi*, but logical by any other sentient measure. The ambassador caste contradicts our understanding of the race, but not the conduct of war.' His left arm unfolded. He spread his hand, telescoping its digits until they corresponded approximately to the various ork armies marked on the map. 'Here I observe behaviour both anomalous and nonsensical. The *Veridi* have abandoned Caldera's capital, its pillage incomplete. There are no significant population centres in the directions they are pursuing. There are no targets of strategic worth.'

Imren said, 'They aren't conquering the planet. They're tearing it apart.'

'But they must have had some reason to come down,' Koorland mused.

'The primarch?' Thane asked.

'I refuse to believe they knew about his presence here before we did.'

‘And yet Ullanor...’

Koorland shook his head. ‘Even so, that is a leap too far.’

Thane did not pursue the point.

‘I agree the supposition cannot be supported,’ Arouar continued. ‘I would suggest their presence on the surface of Caldera is connected to the use of the planet we have already observed. This is the first time we have seen the construction of an attack moon.’

Koorland found the speculation unsatisfying. ‘Even if Laccolith was a target of opportunity, why abandon it before they were finished with it?’

‘Quite.’ Arouar made a fist and spread his fingers, suggesting a purposeless radiation of the ork hordes.

‘Puzzling,’ said Imren. ‘Does it help us with our mission?’

‘I don’t know,’ Koorland admitted. ‘I won’t discount its significance, though. We should also speak with local survivors.’

He met with several of them a few minutes later. They were escorted onto the base by a squad of Lucifer Blacks, and waited outside the command tent. Their uniforms were almost as ragged as their bodies, patched with strips of leather and reinforced with scrap metal. The insignia of the Laccolith Defence Militia were still visible: two converging spears creating the silhouette of a volcano. One man had carved the lines into his forehead, wearing his pride on his flesh. They were young, but their faces were lined with the sudden age of brutal experience.

‘I salute you, citizens,’ Koorland told them. ‘You have resisted well. You are alive, and so is your city.’

‘Thank you, lord,’ the man with the carved forehead said.

‘How did you drive off the orks?’

‘We didn’t,’ said a woman. ‘We were saved.’

‘By whom?’

The mortals shared a look of religious awe.

‘We don’t know,’ the first man told Koorland. ‘We only saw him at a distance.’

‘He wore power armour,’ Koorland guessed.

Blank silence from the mortals.

Koorland tapped his chest-plate. ‘Like mine.’

They all nodded.

‘But greater,’ the woman said. ‘He is a giant. Taller even than you, lord.’

And he cannot die.’

More nods. More awed looks.

Curious, Koorland asked, ‘What do you mean?’

‘He fought so many. He should have died. I saw an entire hab fall on him.’

‘A rocket landed where he was standing,’ the scarred man said.

Every one of them had witnessed these and other moments that would have meant death for any being who fell within these mortals’ conception of *human*.

‘He never died,’ the first woman said. ‘We all saw him die, and we were always wrong. He always returned. Never close to where we thought he’d died. Always somewhere else. In the end, he drew the greenskins away from us.’

‘They didn’t care about Laccolith anymore,’ said the scarred man. ‘They went after him. Their entire army.’

Koorland pictured Arouar’s hand gesture over the map. The illogical pattern now made sense. He thanked the group. They left to continue rebuilding Laccolith’s defences.

And if we find the primarch, Koorland thought, and we depart with him, what happens to these people?

He knew the answer. There would be no one guarding Laccolith. All of its walls had fallen. And as the orks sent more and more of the planet’s crust into orbit to join the attack moon, the point could very well come that volatile Caldera tore itself apart.

He turned around. Thane was a few steps away. His face mirrored Koorland’s thoughts.

‘We’re fighting to save the Imperium,’ Koorland said.

‘I know. I have to wonder when the sacrifices will be enough.’

‘They are all too great.’

The *Finality*’s starboard broadside took out the midsection of the ork cruiser as it turned to make a ramming charge at the *Absolute Decree*. Admiral Zdenek Rodolph savoured the moment. He saw the greenskin vessel’s own ammunition reserves trigger still larger explosions. The upper portion of the hull blew outwards. The ship continued on its trajectory, bleeding flame and wreckage, its shape distorted as if being

devoured by a greater beast.

‘Come on, damn you,’ Rodolph muttered. ‘You know you’ve been killed. Die.’

The engines had been ruptured by the spreading catastrophe. They erupted now, swallowing the rest of the ship with light of their destruction.

Rodolph grinned. And then the proximity alert tocsins wailed. Captain Groth yelled, ‘Portside! Brace!’

All too late. An ork frigate in full disintegration slammed into the side of the *Finality*’s command structure. The impact hurled Rodolph over the command pulpit. He bounced off a workstation. His right arm snapped and he landed on the deck with his limb twisted at the elbow and folded beneath his body. Slabs of plasteel from the bridge’s vault plunged to the deck, crushing equipment and officers. Power flickered, then surged. Electrical fires started in the smashed stations.

‘Admiral!’ Groth called. She helped Rodolph to his feet. His breath hissed through clamped teeth as his arm swung loose.

‘Get me back up,’ he said. He coughed, breathing smoke and pain.

Groth led him back up the stairs to the pulpit. As she did, the auspex master warned of more vessels incoming.

‘Bring us above the *Decree*,’ Groth ordered. ‘We’ll shield each other.’

The edges of Rodolph’s vision greyed. The rhythm of the grand cruiser’s barrage was muffled. He tasted blood in his mouth. This was more than a broken arm.

Someone was giving a damage report, but he couldn’t make out the words.

‘Are we...’ he started to say.

‘Still in the fight, admiral,’ said Groth.

Rodolph leaned against the pulpit. He gripped the aquila’s wing with his left hand. ‘Get me Broumis,’ he said. The feel of the iron in his hand grounded him. His head spun, but he could think.

A moment later, the captain of the *Absolute Decree* was on the vox.

‘Our position is untenable, admiral,’ Broumis said. ‘The orks are...’ An explosion drowned his words.

Rodolph could guess the rest of the captain’s sentence. ‘Agreed. We’ve done our duty here. The forces have made planetfall.’

‘You can’t be calling a retreat,’ said Groth.

‘No. An attack. Set course for the ork moon.’

Broumis was silent for a moment. ‘Admiral,’ he began.

‘I understand the consequence of my order, captain.’

‘Understood.’

Rodolph exchanged a look with Groth. She nodded, and relayed the command.

On the oculus, a swarm of ork frigates closed in.

‘And if the forces on the planet find the primarch,’ Groth said, ‘how will they leave?’

‘If the fleet is destroyed in this location, they are no better off. We have to try to change the conditions of the war. At the very least, we’ll keep the ork fleet occupied.’

More ork torpedoes shot through the defensive fire. The void shields held, but the kinetic energy of the hits still translated through them into a shudder that rocked the *Finality*. Rodolph winced and kept his feet. He clutched the aquila hard enough to cut his palm. His blood ran down the wing. ‘Let me speak to the *Alcazar*,’ he said. His vision was blurring again. ‘Someone get me some stimms!’ he shouted. He would not go dark before the ship. He would not. He would—

He blinked, and Weylon Kale was on the vox. Rodolph shook his head, trying to clear it. A junior officer arrived with stimms. Rodolph downed them. His vision sharpened, but so did his awareness of troubling movement in his chest. He swallowed back another taste of blood, then told Kale what he had ordered. ‘The *Alcazar Remembered* is not under my authority, shipmaster,’ he said. ‘But I hope you see where necessity lies.’

‘You want us to pull out of formation and remain on station.’

‘Yes. I believe most or all of the greenskin fleet will follow us in defence of the moon.’

‘I do understand,’ said Kale, though his reluctance was clear. ‘The success of the mission is paramount.’

The approaching ork frigates were joined by more. The *Finality* and the *Absolute Decree* led the Imperial fleet towards a wall of ships.

‘It is,’ said Rodolph. ‘You have our thanks.’

‘We will add our fire to yours for as long as the conflict is in range.’

‘My hope is that that will not be for long.’

The fleet moved toward the jaws of the enemy, leaving the strength of the

*Alcazar Remembered* behind.

Early afternoon.

The Storm Eagle *Deathblow* streaked over the Calderan landscape. Hemisphere flew just below the cloud cover. Koorland sat in the dorsal heavy bolter turret in place of a servitor. Below him was the jungle, its canopy torn by the huge wounds of the orks' passage. He wished for more altitude, and the ability to see more territory at a glance. But the clouds pressed down, weighed by ash and smoke. Any higher, and he would see nothing at all.

A short while ago, in the command tent, Koorland had said, 'They're searching for their enemy. We have to find him before they do.'

'How will we do that?' Hemisphere had asked.

'That's the question. Let's observe what we can of separate ork forces. I hope we'll know what we are looking for when we see it.'

'I hope you'll forgive me, Chapter Master, but the thread of hope is a thin one.'

'It's all we have. The anomaly is promising, though, and consistent with the reports of the surviving militia. So take us to the orks, Hemisphere. We'll begin with a lateral cut across the columns as we find them. I'll let you know if any warrant a second pass.'

'So ordered.'

Now Hemisphere flew in an outward arc towards the westernmost ork position. The greenskins were not hard to find. The swathe cut through the jungle by each horde was massive, and the force itself was visible from a great distance. First there was dirty smoke on the horizon, and then the shapes came into view: the silhouette of a walker, then the lower hulks of battlefortresses. Then the smaller tanks and trucks. And around the vehicles, the riot of the infantry. Hemisphere skirted the eastern edge of the horde. Its movement was confused. The path of destruction leading to this location followed a straight line, but now the march seemed to have stalled.

'They don't know where they're going,' Hemisphere said.

'No, they don't.'

The orks were milling about, direction lost. There was what looked like the beginnings of a shift to the north-east, but some of the army was still

trying to push west.

The overflight of the *Deathblow* renewed the orks' purpose. The gunship was outside the range of the infantry's weapons, but they fired anyway. It *was* within the reach of the anti-aircraft guns. Solid ordnance and energy beams struck at it.

'They're no use to us,' Koorland said. 'Take us to the next.'

Hemisphere angled the Storm Eagle away, pushing the thrusters. The gunship left the orks behind long before the guns could take its measure.

Koorland thought about the confusion he had seen and what the militia soldiers had told him about Vulkan's appearances in Laccolith. 'The primarch was here,' he said. 'But no longer. They've lost their quarry.'

'We should watch, then, for similar patterns of behaviour with the other cohorts,' said Hemisphere.

'Yes. As soon as you see that symptom, move on. No point in giving them a target. And we don't know how much time we have. These armies won't remain separate for long.'

Hemisphere flew east, angling towards the north as he picked up another swathe. The orks he and Koorland found were as confused as the first army. The gunship flashed over them, not slowing, the brief glance all Koorland needed. These orks reacted quickly. Some of the surface-to-air fire came very close.

'They were expecting us,' Hemisphere said.

'Yes,' said Koorland. 'They're communicating well. More of that damned coordination they've developed.'

They flew past two more armies. More confusion, more chaotic pulling in two directions. Koorland saw a new pattern. The tension in the hordes was always between whatever route they had been following initially, and the north-east.

'They're receiving reports they don't know whether to believe,' he said. 'The evidence of their senses conflicts with the communications from the other groups.'

'If this is Lord Vulkan's doing,' said Hemisphere, 'the strategy is brilliant. He's single-handedly divided the greenskins into multiple, smaller groups that have no idea where they're going. I wish we knew how he was doing this.'

'By being true to his myth,' Koorland muttered.

‘I missed that, Chapter Master.’

‘Nothing, brother. I wish I knew too. But I think we know where we’re heading now.’

‘We do.’

The *Deathblow* flew north-east.

Ahead, the jungle thinned as the land rose. The land, fertilised by frequent falls of volcanic ash, gave way to the barrenness of hardened lava flows. Further north, Koorland saw two massive cones with smoke pouring from their peaks, lit by lightning and the angry red of molten rock. The next force of orks were between the gunship’s position and the two volcanoes, still in the jungle and striking directly towards the peaks. This was the largest horde so far. More warbands were arriving at the rear, perhaps groups that had broken off early from the other mobs. The movement here was assured and violent. Koorland saw a bright flash towards the head of the advance.

‘Brother Hemisphere,’ he said.

‘I saw it, Chapter Master. They’re fighting something.’

Hemisphere turned the Storm Eagle towards the north.

And flew straight into a massive anti-aircraft barrage.

The orks had been waiting for them. Charging forwards to attack their unseen target, racing ahead with the single-minded ferocity and speed of their race, they had still prepared for the *Deathblow*’s appearance.

Hemisphere threw the gunship into evasive turns and rolls. Koorland raked the ground below with the turret’s heavy bolters, and energy bolts lashed the grey late afternoon. A lightning storm reached up from the ground to surround the Storm Eagle. The orks had assembled a battery of energy cannons, and they had waited until Hemisphere had flown within the ring of cannons before opening fire.

Hemisphere vectored the thrusters downwards. The engines shrieked with strain as the gunship shot up and banked south. A crackling beam punched a hole through the centre of the port wing and the engine stuttered. Speed bled away and the gunship dropped. Hemisphere released the wing-mounted stormstrike missiles before the ork fire could blow them up.

The gunship spiralled downwards. Koorland saw the ragged jungle canopy rush towards them, spitting ordnance. His bolter fire felt like nothing more than symbolic defiance.

Hemisphere regained control of the *Deathblow*. The gunship levelled off and skimmed just above the trees, brushing them. A gale of leaves and broken branches surrounded it. The orks lowered their fire, but the ship had dropped faster than they could adjust their aim. Hemisphere stayed low, strafing the ground ahead with the twin-linked assault cannon. Koorland turned his guns the same way. They unleashed an annihilating barrage ahead of them. At this speed, at this proximity, the land and the ork army were a blur. There was no chance to aim. Koorland had a brief glimpse of artillery guns ahead, and then they blew up. The *Deathblow* streaked into a wall of burning plasma.

Then they were through the anti-aircraft ring. Hemisphere angled the ship up again, putting distance between it and the orks. Energy beams arced after them. A rocket screamed by the turret canopy and exploded just off the port wing. The blast wave buffeted the Storm Eagle. The engine stalled again, but Hemisphere kept control of the flight. He dipped the nose, sacrificing altitude for speed, then angled hard to port, and the ork fire went off to the side.

‘I’m satisfied we’ve found our target,’ Hemisphere said.

‘So am I.’ These orks were not marching or searching. They were at war. They had an enemy. Koorland opened a vox-channel to Thane. ‘We have our target. I’m sending you the coordinates. Begin the mobilisation now.’

The Imperial advance was rapid. The orks had paved the way, destroying the jungle as they advanced, flattening all obstacles. Adeptus Astartes, Astra Militarum and Mechanicus contingents moved north on the trail the enemy had left. In less than two hours, the smoke of their vehicles was in sight. Even so, Koorland wished for more speed. He had no proof Vulkan was battling the front lines of the greenskin column. And if the primarch was there, how long could the struggle continue?

He forced the questions aside, placing them with his doubts. There was a clear path of action open to him, so he took it. Since the disaster of Ardamantua, he had been faced with one hard decision after another. Each time, the choice had been clear. Each time, the outcome uncertain.

They all still were.

But now there was the immediacy of the mission, and the fury of an assault. And for the first time since Ardamantua, he had the prospect of

seeing the orks bleed.

Koorland rode with a squad of the Last Wall in one of the Rhinos the Fists Exemplar had turned over for the company's use. The transport was in the front line of the advance. He sat in the top hatch, watching the jungle ahead, tracking the progress of the combined effort of the Adeptus Astartes, the Astra Militarum and the Mechanicus. He was closing on the orks with the power to topple worlds.

He kept the assault force in a tight fist. He assumed the orks knew the attack was coming, so planned to render their information useless with a massive, overwhelming blow. The army advanced at the speed of its infantry. Gunships flew overwatch. Tanks held their fire until the last minute. Hemisphere took the *Deathblow* up again, maintaining a cautious distance until Koorland ordered the attack.

'What can you see?' Koorland asked him.

'The rearguard is still moving forwards. The horde's direction is unchanged from earlier.'

'They aren't turning to fight us?'

'It seems not. Either they aren't aware of our approach or they don't care.'

'Then it's time they did.'

Still he waited, until he caught his first sight of the rearmost orks. He could not hear their snarls over the clanking roar of the Imperial transports and tanks, but he saw the ferocity in their movements. They were rushing to fight an enemy thousands of metres ahead of them, ignoring the one approaching from behind.

Koorland switched to the combat network. 'Now!' he said.

A new volcano erupted in the Calderan jungle. Its eruption was focused. Its devastation was controlled. It was a thing of metal and ceramite, of promethium and particle beams. It was flesh and machine. It was the fury of the Imperium come to punish the xenos.

The artillery barrage reached ahead of the rearguard. Predators, Whirlwinds, Dunecrawlers, Basilisks and Wyverns fired at once. Beams, mortars, rockets and shells struck the targeted region, and a second Imperial volcano erupted in answer to the first. The middle distance turned into a firestorm that rose to the clouds. Silhouetted fragments of ork bodies and vehicles tumbled through the flames. The thunder of the salvo

was like the planet itself cracking in two.

As the tanks and artillery vehicles continued the bombardment, the infantry charged the rear of the ork column. Fists Exemplar and the Last Wall poured out of Rhinos and Land Raiders. Behind them came the skitarii and the Guard. Assault squads rode jump packs ahead of the main charge and came down in the midst of orks, between the walking barrage and the battering ram of the infantry.

I am Slaughter, Koorland thought. His wall-name had been stolen from him by that terrible voice over Ardamantua. Now he reclaimed it. He struck the orks with a wall of battle-brothers and a hurricane wind of mass-reactive shells. He had brought annihilation to the enemy. He had brought vengeance. 'I am Slaughter!' he shouted, his bolter on full burst, and he saw a measure of justice for his murdered brothers in the butchery he unleashed.

The Imperial advance was fast, but measured, disciplined. Las, shells, electrical arcs and plasma bolts hit the orks in an unbroken wave. The assault squads spread ripples of ruin and confusion. Hundreds of metres of the enemy column collapsed into anarchy. Wherever the orks turned, they were cut down. They fought back, but there was no coherence to their response. There was order only in the manner of their deaths. The infantry charged in conflicting directions. Trucks and warbikes were caught in the crush, unable to manoeuvre, their wheels spinning over the bodies of the fallen until rockets and grenades turned them into flaming coffins.

Further on, the massive shapes of two vast walkers bulked against the sky, higher than the flames. Gunships attacked them in squadrons. Flying through the anti-aircraft fire, the Imperial flights strafed the walkers with lascannons and heavy bolters. The walkers lumbered to retaliate. They brought their heavy weapons to bear on departing aircraft only to be hit from another flank by the next squadron. As the gunships passed the walkers, they looped back to launch missiles at the ork tanks.

Koorland felt the momentum of the campaign. It was a beast upon the land, tearing into its prey. It was also a mechanism of violence, crushing the enemy with implacable precision. Three branches of the Imperium's might fought as one, their collective forming the sinews of the beast, the gears of the machine. This was the unity so absent in the Great Chamber. The competing agendas that had led to the madness on Mars were gone.

The corrupt self-interest of the High Lords and the divisions they fostered threatened the Imperium as much as the orks. But here, now, the servants of the Emperor did their duty. In this moment, the fall of the greenskins seemed inevitable, no matter how far they evolved or how advanced their technology.

The stench of the war reached Koorland through his helmet grille, the humid mix of rotting vegetation, burnt fyceline and spilled blood. In the distance, barely audible over the clamour of the battle, the saurian carnivores of Caldera snarled their fury. They were displaced. Predators far worse than they were at war.

A battlewagon reared over the bodies of infantry. Smashing the living and the dead beneath its wheels and treads, it thundered towards the front line of the Last Wall. Koorland and Daylight ran at it, splitting left and right. Its gunner swung the cannon after Koorland. The shell exploded behind him, and then he was too close. Orks leaned out of hatches, hammering his armour with shots. He turned towards the vehicle's front at the last second, leaping up to grab the top of its siege shield. He clung with one hand and threw a frag grenade through the driver's slit in the armour. On the right, Daylight slapped a krak to the side.

The slit spat flame and the battlewagon veered wildly. Koorland jumped away from the shield as the krak grenade went off, melting through the rear treads and the hull. The vehicle's fuel ignited and the blossom of fire lifted the back of the wagon as it slewed. It rolled, crushing the orks in its turrets. It became a tumbling mass of shredding metal and flame, killing the orks still in its path. The Last Wall parted to let it pass.

On the flanks, the Sydonian Dragoons moved up, racing forwards on their Ironstriders. The legs of their bipedal steeds were long enough that they could have stepped effortlessly over the heads of the enemy. Instead, they smashed greenskins down with each stride. The dragoons held their taser lances pointed low. With the Ironstriders moving at full gallop, the lances stitched lines of chained incinerations.

And the rifle fire was unstinting. There was no standing against the Imperial storm. The counter-charges were brief and shattered before they could begin. There was only one direction the orks could go. They took it.

They fled.

'The enemy is in retreat,' Koorland shouted. 'Drive it into the ground!'

The Imperial machine pursued. The speed of the orks surprised Koorland. Even allowing for the gap in their ranks created by the artillery, they had seemed too densely packed.

‘Hemisphere,’ he voxed, ‘tell me what you see.’

It took a moment for the pilot to answer. Koorland heard him grunt and a background burst of energy. Further ahead, the orks were still lashing at the aircraft. ‘There’s a gap between the bulk of the horde and the struggle involving the front lines. I couldn’t see it before. I think they only slowed down when we began the assault. But they’re catching up quickly now.’

Unease gnawed at the edge of triumph. But the odd greenskin strategy changed nothing. Koorland led the pursuit without pause, chewing up the rear ranks of the enemy, the cannons pounding the centre of the horde.

The jungle thinned, then ended. The ground became rockier. The terrain sloped upwards, turning into craggy foothills in advance of the two volcanoes. The horde retreated even faster. The mounted mass abandoned the slower infantry. The orks fought to climb aboard the trucks and the tops of battlewagons. Bikes and overloaded vehicles roared up the slope. The gap between the two armies widened.

Unease became alarm.

‘Stop their flight!’ Koorland ordered. ‘Land Speeders to the fore. Dominus Arouar, we need your fastest troops!’

And Hemisphere was shouting in his ear. ‘They’re not retreating! They have camouflaged positions. They—’

A new thunder of cannons drowned Hemisphere out. The orks’ heavy tanks burst from their concealment. The walkers, damaged but still fighting, turned away from the harassing aircraft and aimed their massive guns downhill. From the heights, they dropped the sky down on the Imperial forces. Koorland heard the shriek of high-explosive shells, and then he was in the air, lifted off his feet as the ground hurtled skywards. His battle-brothers and the rest of the strike force vanished in the flare of crimson and coruscating green.

He landed on his back, cracking stone. He rolled and surged to his feet.

‘Force them back!’ he voxed. ‘Artillery, take out the tanks! Our cannons outnumber theirs.’

Through the smoke and blasts, he saw the Last Wall and the Fists Exemplar climbing with him. The formation was ragged, but the fire still

constant.

And the ork infantry had stopped retreating. It was digging in, returning the Imperial salvos with a vengeance.

‘Keep advancing,’ he heard Thane order the Fists Exemplar. ‘Keep the initiative.’

Wreckage everywhere: Ironstriders twisted and smoking, mortals turned into meat, their uniforms so burned and soaked in blood there was no identifying their regiment. Through the dead and through the meteor storm of the ork barrage, the Imperial forces advanced.

*Keep the initiative.*

We never had it, Koorland thought.

The shadow of Ardamantua fell on him. Though he marched up the slope, though he weathered the shots scoring and pitting his armour, though he led an attack that was still disciplined, still coherent, still powerful, he felt the sickening knowledge of imminent disaster.

It was Hemisphere who first saw what was coming. It was his voice that became the messenger of doom.

‘Chapter Master! Major ork forces closing from the east and west!’

Uphill, the ork cannons paused for a moment. Wind cleared the smoke, and Koorland could see the scale of the counter-attack.

*No, not a counter-attack. A trap.*

To the left and to the right, armies fully as large as the one to the north closed in.

An ocean of savagery came to drown the Imperial machine.

# SIX

## Caldera – Laccolith

Smoke. Fire. Volcanic rock turned into a shrapnel whirlwind. Crashing waves of xenos muscle, blades and rifle fire. The slope caught in a hurricane of war. Directions becoming meaningless. The world disintegrating, reduced to the clamour of violent death. The vox a torrent from all the elements of the strike force.

‘Heavy weapons hitting us from the west...’

‘... the east, the east, the east...’

‘... suppressive fire on those tanks...’

‘... pushing us back...’

‘... maintain formation or I’ll shoot you myself...’

‘... consolidate Dunecrawler line...’

‘... lost...’

‘... close that gap, by the Throne, close—’

The screams of dying mortals. Chattering binharic dissolving into feedback whines. The grim calm of battle-brothers falling into sudden silence.

The choir of disaster.

The Last Wall closed ranks. The company became a ceramite barrier. Bolter shells and streams of flaming promethium slammed against the orks, exploding and incinerating flesh. At the northernmost tip of the Imperial advance, Koorland’s veterans held the ork infantry at bay.

‘They will not pass, Chapter Master,’ Eternity promised.

‘It is we who must pass,’ Koorland said. ‘Artillery,’ he voxed, ‘sustained fire to the north. All other forces, protect the artillery. We must advance!’

Their goal was almost in sight, beyond a few more ridges.

But the upper slope was hidden by ceaseless explosions. The fury of the Imperial guns thinned the ork infantry. The small-arms fire coming from the heights diminished. But the salvos of the ork cannons were unceasing. Greenskin heavy support from the east and west now bombarded the slopes.

On the Imperial flanks, the ork infantry crashed against the Imperial forces. They broke the charge of the dragoons. Lumbering monsters in thick plate armour hurled their bulk against the legs of the Ironstriders. They toppled the steeds, then fell on the riders with power claws and killsaws, crushing metal, tearing flesh.

Skitarii could still bleed.

‘Gunships,’ Koorland called, ‘we need those artillery placements taken out.’

‘We are attacking,’ Hemisphere replied. ‘Their anti-aircraft fire is much stronger than we supposed. Two Xiphon interceptors and a Thunderhawk already lost.’

Koorland cursed. He marched forwards into the roiling flames. Overhead, eradicator beams lanced at the enemy as the Dunecrawlers manoeuvred through the Astra Militarum and skitarii infantry. The energy vanished into the maelstrom before him.

The Last Wall’s line advanced. The battle-brothers on the flanks held back the rampage of the ork infantry. Faster than they died, the greenskins kept coming, wave after wave. They ran over their dead and stormed through the explosions. In the brute savagery of the charge, Koorland saw a dual threat. Beyond the sheer power of the massed attack, it was also the reason humanity underestimated the greenskins again and again. This way of war was barely beyond the animal. It was what he would have expected of a pack of saurians. There was no way these savages could be capable of complex strategy.

No way they could have outwitted and outfought and humiliated the Imperium again and again.

No way they could have destroyed an entire Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes.

No way they could have trapped the strike force. Not when he had already witnessed their capabilities. Not when he knew better.

The taste of failure was bitter. The taste of shame was ash. Koorland swallowed them both. He gave himself to rage. He would not let the mission fail.

He marched into the vortex. There was no other option. There was no other path open. No choice.

He advanced as though will alone would defeat the reality before him.

It was like walking on the surface of a sun. Solid ground was an illusion. Koorland walked into eruption, into the kinetic fury of war embodied.

He was that fury too. He was the vengeance and the justice of the Imperial Fists. He was the Emperor's war given flesh. He roared his challenge to the enemy.

The storm of war answered him with its greater voice. It mocked him. It hurled him back.

A cannon shell landed a few metres ahead. The blast knocked him to his knees. A volley followed, and everything before him vanished. The earth erupted, and he was tumbling through the flame. He landed hard. He slammed his fist into the slope, punching through rock to arrest his slide. He stood. On either side, his battle-brothers were recovering.

They had been pushed back down the hillside. The storm marched down towards them, eating the slope, a volcano opening its jaws to swallow the Last Wall.

Koorland's retinal lenses were a riot of death and warnings. They were a single message. The way forwards was barred to him.

The stimms coursed through Rodolph's bloodstream. They boosted his adrenaline. His eyes were clear. He could think. He'd taken several shots of painkillers and his body was distant to him, its pain merely information transmitted through heavy interference. He stood, but he did not know how long that would be possible. He was leaning against the pulpit, his left hand still locked around the aquila as if it had been soldered to the iron. His blood flowed from his palm. His breath rattled like stones in a canteen. His body was broken. He knew this. It would not last long.

'Admiral,' the medicae tried again.

'I'm not interested, Feld.'

'Without treatment—'

'No time. Go be useful elsewhere. That's an order.'

Plenty of wounded for Feld to tend. More all the time. Rodolph had tuned out the news of the *Finality's* wounds and the casualties in the crew in the same way he had blocked the weakness of his body. All that mattered was the war outside. What mattered was what he and his cruiser could do.

The *Finality* and the *Absolute Decree* ploughed through the ork ships as through an ocean in full gale. The Imperial fleet was moving closer to the attack moon, but it was shedding ships. The two cruisers reinforced each other with their salvoes. There was never a pause in the barrage and the orks could not get close enough to ram, but their torpedoes took a toll. And the escorts were dying. The orks came at them in overwhelming numbers and picked them off one by one.

The upper right of the oculus flared. Just beyond its view, something had died.

‘The *Protocol of Judgement* is gone,’ said Groth.

Another of the Adeptus Mechanicus frigates. Half of the Martian fleet had been destroyed.

‘Admiral,’ voxed Broumis on the *Absolute Decree*. ‘There’s a gap in the enemy formations.’

Rodolph looked at the tacterarium screens. He saw what had drawn Broumis’ attention. Below the ecliptic and to starboard, only a single ork cruiser appeared. Rodolph exchanged a look with Groth.

‘Too easy,’ she said, but she had the oculus trained to that region. The greenskin vessel had taken severe hits. Its bow was cratered. One of its engines was dead. It had been left behind by its escort, which was closing with the destroyer *Lord Commander Celadion*. Beyond the ork cruiser was a clear run to the attack moon.

Inviting.

Three torpedoes shot through the defensive fire and struck the *Finality* in the stern. Rodolph felt the impact vibrate through the deck and travel up his spine. His knees sagged. As the void shields flickered, teetering on the edge of cascading failure, his body reached out for him and tried to drag him down into the mire of its pain.

He gritted his teeth. Groth was speaking. He forced himself to hear.

‘Negative,’ she was saying to Broumis. ‘The enemy concentration around us is too great. We can’t break through to that gap.’

‘I can.’

The *Decree* was running below the *Finality*, while the bulk of the ork fleet had risen above it.

‘We can make the run,’ Broumis said. ‘If you can hold them, we can smash that cruiser and reach the moon.’

‘The instant you try, the entire fleet will turn from us to you,’ Groth objected. ‘We’re only holding our own because we’re together. Divided, they’ll finish us.’

‘We’re finished anyway. What are we doing except delaying the inevitable by a short period? Our sacrifices will be in vain.’

‘Captain Broumis,’ Rodolph said. Speech was difficult. His tongue was as distant from his command as the rest of his body. Did Groth notice the delay between his thoughts and his actions?

He blinked the absurdity away. He dragged his palm over the aquila, pulling the wound open, jolting himself with another burst of pain. He would need more stimms soon. ‘Captain,’ he said again, ‘delay is the value of our sacrifice. The success of the mission will be decided on the surface of Caldera, not by what we do here.’

‘If we destroy the moon, we will be guaranteeing victory planetside.’

‘You’ll never get close enough,’ said Groth. ‘The gravity weapon will tear you apart.’

‘We’re already closer than should be possible. All of the weapon’s energies must be being used in the construction. The moon is vulnerable. Admiral, you must give the order.’

I will do no such thing, you insubordinate fool, Rodolph thought. When Groth turned to stare at him, he realised he hadn’t said the words. ‘I wuhhh...’ he said. His tongue was clumsy. It was too big. How could it fit into his mouth?

His left hand went numb. He could no longer feel the pulpit. He looked down. He saw his fingers open. He willed them closed. They disobeyed. His hand fell to his side. His knees folded. He slumped forwards. The eagle’s heads rushed to meet him. They cracked his skull. His vision filled with swarming dots of black.

Was he still falling?

No, the ship was shaking again. He was lying on the floor of the strategium. His ears were filled with lead, but he thought he heard Groth’s voice.

Yes, he did. She was bending over him, her lips were moving. She was shouting, first at him, then at someone else. Who would she be talking to?

Broumis?

Yes, Broumis. Who was doing something foolish. Who must...

Who must...

The swarming black covered his eyes. Deal with Broumis later. Perhaps he would sleep. But it was so cold.

Electronic shrieking. Those tocsins again. Not as loud as they were. That was good. Easier to sleep.

Sleep.

Then he was awake, gasping, adrenaline surging again, fire racing up his left arm and through the back of his neck. His heart hammered at his ribcage. He sat up fast. His temples throbbed.

Feld was kneeling beside him. 'He's back,' the medicae said to Groth. 'But I can't give him another dose like that.'

'You'll dose me like that for as long as we have a ship,' Rodolph snarled. He took Groth's proffered hand and got to his feet.

The pict screen to the left of the aquila showed the dispositions of the fleet. The runes beside the representation of the *Absolute Decree* began to flash. The ship's orientation was changing.

'Broumis!' Rodolph yelled. 'Do not break formation!'

'Your wounds are severe, admiral. You were unable to articulate your orders a few moments ago. You have been incapacitated, and are no longer able to command. By virtue of seniority, I am now the ranking officer in this fleet. I must take the actions that stand the best chance of leading to victory for the Imperium.'

'You're grandstanding, Broumis!' said Groth. 'There's no glory to be had here!'

'Hold them off us, captain. Those are your new orders. Keep their attention for as long as you can.'

'Don't be insane!'

'He won't listen,' Rodolph said quietly. The runes on the screen kept changing. The angle between the two grand cruisers was growing. The *Absolute Decree* was pointing her bow down towards the ork vessel and the attack moon beyond. 'No choice now,' he told Groth. 'Do as Broumis says.' He was too exhausted to feel the rage that should be his. 'Do what

you can.'

He moved to one side of the pulpit, making room for Groth.

She stepped forwards. 'Helm,' she said, 'make for the primary cluster of ships at fifteen degrees starboard. Weapons stations, concentrate fire on the lead cruiser.'

The vox clamoured for Rodolph's attention. It was Princeps 4-Syndesi, commanding the Mechanicus ships. 'Admiral Rodolph. We observe trajectory alterations. Please advise of tactical revisions.'

'This is Illaia Groth,' the captain answered. 'I am speaking for the admiral. The *Absolute Decree* is proceeding alone. Form up on the *Finality*. Keep the enemy's focus on our positions.'

'Requesting elaboration. What is the purpose of the manoeuvre?'

'To hold off disaster as best we can, princeps. Captain Broumis is proceeding against orders.'

'Clarification accepted. Requesting our negative estimation of the approach be noted.'

Rodolph straightened. Groth let him lean forwards to answer. 'Our estimation is the same.'

He leaned against the pulpit once more. He winced as the shell and torpedo hits became more numerous as the *Absolute Decree* put distance between the cruisers, making them both more vulnerable.

'Hull breach in launch bay sigma,' Groth said.

'I don't need to know,' Rodolph gasped. 'When we die, we die.' He nodded at the oculus. 'Show me what Broumis is doing.'

The orientation of the view changed. Most of the attacking ships vanished. The *Absolute Decree* appeared in the centre of the oculus, its engines flaring hot. Nearly eight thousand metres of war leviathan turned away from the fleet, almost twice the size of the ork cruiser coming to meet it. No other ork vessels joined the duel, and the struggle was a brief one. The *Decree's* armament overwhelmed the orks' guns and shield plating. Long before it could attempt to ram, the cruiser broke in half. Broumis kept up the barrage. The enemy ship disintegrated in a chain of plasma flares.

The path to the attack moon was clear.

'Was he right?' Rodolph wondered. He hadn't doubted his decisions until now. But Broumis had far more experience. Rodolph's strength was

slipping away. Perhaps he was no longer fit to command.

‘No,’ said Groth. She widened her stance, standing firm against the hammering jolts to the bridge. ‘He was wrong.’

‘He’s getting through.’

‘The enemy’s mistake is too obvious.’

The *Absolute Decree* moved towards the moon. It picked up speed. All its batteries trained their fire on the target. On the surface of the moon, bright flowers blossomed.

Pinpricks.

‘Cyclonic torpedoes,’ Rodolph muttered.

As if Broumis had heard, two fateful streaks shot from the cruiser’s bow.

Rodolph held his breath. Now he hoped he and Groth were wrong. He hoped Broumis’ disobedience would save them all.

Groth was shaking her head.

‘Why not?’ Rodolph asked.

She pointed. Objects scattered throughout the near space of the moon glinted. ‘Orbital defences,’ Groth said.

A few moments later, a web of las-fire cut short the flight of the torpedoes.

More pinpricks from the *Decree*’s guns flickered on the surface of the moon, assaults so trivial they were ignored.

Broumis voxed them again. ‘I have ordered ramming speed. In the name of the Emperor, we surrender our lives.’

‘No!’ Groth called. ‘That won’t be enough to pierce the crust. Captain, turn around. It isn’t too late.’

‘The planetside face,’ Rodolph said. ‘The incomplete portion of the moon. It might be vulnerable.’

‘My thanks, admiral,’ said Broumis.

When Groth looked at him, Rodolph said, ‘It is too late.’ But perhaps there was a last chance to make Broumis’ gambit work.

The *Absolute Decree* accelerated. Its orientation changed again. Its bow began to turn towards Caldera, preparing for the swing around and into the target.

‘We can’t even see that face,’ Groth said.

‘We know what we can see is invulnerable. What else is left to try?’

She remained unconvinced. ‘You believe the ship can manoeuvre through

*that?* She pointed at the huge masses of crust rising from Caldera. They were larger than the *Decree*.

‘What else is left?’ Rodolph repeated. The *Finality* was pummelled again. He heard a weapons officer confirm another ork vessel destroyed. Rodolph was in the midst of an end-game battle, but his awareness shrank to the oculus and the ponderous movements of the grand cruiser. Broumis had doomed them all. The war would end sooner because he had broken rank. All that mattered now was the tattered hope he had become.

The *Absolute Decree* moved closer, reaching a lower orbit than the moon. Broumis was in position to make the run at the unfinished region.

‘Why is he not being attacked?’ Groth asked.

Rodolph’s blood chilled. He would have liked to believe the space around the *Decree* was empty because the rest of the fleet had drawn the attention of all the enemy ships. But these orks did not make such monumental tactical errors. Not even the orbital defences were firing.

Not a single shot.

Only the moon, the *Absolute Decree*, and the void.

And the mountains. The flying mountains.

‘No,’ Rodolph whispered.

‘Why couldn’t we see?’ Groth said, agonised. She called to Broumis. She tried to warn him. Rodolph didn’t hear what she said. For him too, now, there was only the moon, the ship, the void. And the mountains.

It was, he realised, not a question of Broumis having to avoid the terrible masses.

The doom began in the form of a single pulse of light. A corona around the moon. The surface seemed to ripple, perception distorted by the intensity of the gravitic wave. An invisible hand grasped the rising chunk of Caldera. The rock was over twenty kilometres across, the size of a small planetoid. The grip whipped the mass away from the moon, and into the path of the *Absolute Decree*.

The cruiser’s orientation shifted once more. The movement was slow, minute, futile. There would be no evasion.

A mountain range smashed into the *Absolute Decree*. The cruiser shattered like glass. The fragments of its hull spread apart with awful grace, backlit by a billowing inferno. The warp drive erupted. Killing light filled the oculus, consuming the meteor. The shock wave travelled ahead

of the hurtling fragments of ships and rock, washing over the fleets and moon. The *Finality* shuddered in the midst of holocaust. Rodolph saw the names of smaller ships vanish from the pict screen. After the light, darkness taking ally and foe alike.

But there were still so many orks. Even as ships collided with the wreckage of others, the armada kept attacking.

The darkness reached into the bridge of the *Finality*. It wrapped its fist around Rodolph's head, squeezing, trying to force him into the night of despair and unconsciousness.

'Keep fighting,' he whispered. He clutched the aquila for strength. He clutched it for hope.

All he felt was cold iron.

Through the creeping dark of his pain, all he saw was the final approach of an enemy with the power of a god.

She almost didn't see the battlewagon. A chance parting of the smoke, the luck of her glance to the east. The ork tank was some distance from her position. If not for the fires of burning vehicles, it would have been invisible in the falling night. But Imren saw it, and she saw the flash of its gun. Instinct said *down*. She dropped through the hatch of the Chimera.

A second later, the shell tore through the roof of the tank. It destroyed the turret. A burst of flame reached into the interior. Imren protected her head with her arms, and the sleeves of her uniform caught fire. She beat them out against the inner hull, blinked through pain and smoke. Her gunner was dead. The command table was shattered. But the Chimera was still moving.

'Nissen!' she called out. 'Tell me it's you driving!'

'It is, general!' Nissen shouted back from his compartment.

'Do you still have vox capability?' The equipment around her was ruined.

'I do.'

'Then you'll relay my orders. For now, keep going.'

Imren grabbed the ragged edge of the roof and pulled herself up. She looked around at the state of the rout.

The Imperial forces were in full retreat. They had abandoned any thought of advancing. They were racing for Laccolith and the hell of urban warfare. There was no advantage to be gained, no siege to prepare, only

the flight and the play for time.

This was wrong. All of it. She had come to Caldera to restore honour. She wished to repair the name of the Lucifer Blacks, guardian regiment of the heart of the Imperial Palace, battered by the eldar incursion and the brazen arrival of the ork ambassadors. Even more crucially, the pride of the Astra Militarum needed to be rebuilt after the disaster of the Proletarian Crusade. The mission to Caldera represented the first true hope for the Imperium since the start of the war.

A false hope, it now seemed. An illusion of perfect cruelty. The orks were invincible.

She looked forwards. Laccolith was somewhere ahead in the dark. It had to be close, but there was no illumination in the city. She would have little notice of its proximity until she crossed the remnants of its wall.

On all sides, the combined regiments raced through the shattered jungle. The retreat was a flight. The strategy was sound – the only course of action was to reach the urban battlefield ahead of the orks, seize it, and use the terrain to slow the enemy down. But the sense of the tactic did nothing to mitigate the humiliation. All she saw was defeat, the combined forces of the Emperor running for their lives from a triumphant, mocking foe.

The orks pressed in on either flank. The Imperials were using the cleared swathe of the jungle. The greenskins had to smash their way through the trees and dense vegetation again in an effort to keep up. They were doing well, scorching the earth with flamers, splintering trunks with the siege shields of tanks and trucks. The jungle slowed them just enough. Imren thought the strike force would reach the city in time.

Our only success will be to run from a fight, she thought.

Imren's Chimera had been at the front of the Astra Militarum ranks during the advance. She was towards the rear during the retreat. The greater mass of infantry and vehicles streamed ahead of her. In the distance, she caught glimpses of heavy, reptilian bodies flashing in headlamp beams.

'Nissen,' she called. 'What's happening at the front?'

After a pause, the driver answered. 'Saurian attacks, general. Packs of the beasts. They're hitting the infantry.'

Caldera was turning on them, Imren thought. It was mocking their defeat.

Streams from the great river of the ork hordes stabbed into the ranks. The

troops fought back, hitting the enemy with all the rage of savaged pride. The night around her was lit by the streaks of las and tracer fire. Three orks ran straight for the left side of the Chimera, grabbing the hull. The turret gone, Imren climbed up onto the rear portion of the roof, which had been spared the impact of the shell. She held on to a spike of twisted metal with her right hand and fired her plasma pistol into the upturned faces of the orks. She returned their snarls with her own, her hate as brutal as their joy. She burned the head off one. As it fell, it knocked one of its fellows off the hull. Both disappeared under the treads.

The third slashed at Imren with a machete. She reared back, lost her footing and fell. Her pistol clattered into the troop compartment. She kept her grip on the spike. Its jagged edges cut through the leather of her gloves. Her boots struggled to find a hold on the side of the hull.

The ork jumped on top of the Chimera. It crouched over her, grinning, its foetid breath making her eyes water. It raised the machete over its head.

Imren pulled on the spike with all her strength. She bent her arm and hauled herself up, grabbed the greenskin's harness with her left hand, and dropped back. The sudden weight overbalanced the ork and it plunged forwards. The spike rammed through its eye and cracked out the back of its skull.

Imren climbed up the corpse. She pulled the head off the spike and pushed the body off the Chimera. She stood on the roof, her breath coming in growling heaves and looked out at the jungle, and the cauldron of struggle and flight. She saw the broken towers of Laccolith emerge from the darkness. She filled her lungs with the torrid air, with the fyceline-and-burnt-flesh stench of defeat, with all her despair and rage, and she roared.

The war answered back.

There was no line to hold in Laccolith. There was no keeping the orks out, or forcing them back. There was only the hope of bogging them down. To break up the concentration of the horde, and tangle them in the canyons of rockcrete.

A play for time. Nothing more. It wasn't good enough. There was no end except a delay of extermination.

Koorland led the Last Wall down a narrow avenue. They had less than a minute's lead on the orks. The artillery barrage of the city had already

begun. A shell destroyed the upper portion of a hab on the right. The street filled with a cloud of powdered wall.

Marching beside him, Eternity said, 'We can ambush them here.'

'We keep moving,' said Koorland. 'We wait for word from Hemisphere.'

The word came when the Last Wall was deep into the dust cloud. And Hemisphere gave Koorland what he needed.

'Chapter Master,' the pilot voxed, 'I managed another pass towards the target position. A portion of the ork army is still there.'

'Did you see what they're fighting?'

'I couldn't get near. Most of their anti-air is concentrated near that position.'

They really don't want us to approach, Koorland thought. He opened a channel to the other commanders. 'Our original target is still viable. The orks are using their full strength because they are desperate to prevent us from reaching it.'

'They have been successful,' said Arouar.

'They have also given us the opportunity to turn that success into failure. They are following us into Laccolith.'

'How does that help?' Imren asked.

'We must hold their army here while a small force makes an aerial insertion up the slope.'

Thane said, 'The Thunderhawks will await you at the space port.'

'We've defeated these orks before!' Thane called to his company. 'We won on Eidolica! Today, a delay is a victory.'

The Fists Exemplar had taken the main avenue cutting through the centre of Laccolith. It was the fastest route to the space port, and the most inviting path for a large force. The ork super-heavies were most likely to take this route, so the avenue was the one most important to deny to the enemy.

'We don't know the greenskins have any idea what Koorland is attempting,' Aquino had said as they set up the ambush.

'We don't,' Thane had agreed. 'Should we underestimate them yet again?'

Now, Aloysian answered Thane's shout. 'Let the delay begin, Chapter Master.'

The Techmarine had worked fast. Under his supervision, it had taken less than five minutes to plant the demolition charges. The greenskin horde thundered down the avenue, lured by the harassing attacks of the Predators. The Adeptus Astartes tanks backed up, still firing, until they crossed the kill-zone. On either side of the street, the foundations of hab-blocks exploded.

Already weakened by the initial fighting in Laccolith, the towers collapsed, falling towards each other. They came down on the front ranks of the orks, crushing them beneath thousands of tonnes of rubble, filling the street with an avalanche of rockcrete and dust. The wall of wreckage was a dozen metres high. The assault squad landed on its peak and rained fire on the orks below. The rest of the company attacked from the structures on either side, trapping the greenskins in a lethal dead end. Gunships flew low on the avenue, raking the enemy with cannons and heavy bolters, missiles tearing into the greenskin tanks.

The orks stopped. The infantry began to pull back.

‘Do they think we’re stupid?’ Aquino voxed.

‘Keep hitting them,’ said Thane. ‘But keep a distance.’ He would not lead his men into a counter-ambush.

‘Only the infantry is pulling back,’ Aloysian said. ‘The heavy guns are moving forwards.’

At the end of the avenue, a walker and three battlefortresses advanced. Before the infantry was fully clear, they opened up. The barrage was monstrous. The Fists Exemplar pulled back as the street erupted, explosions hammering the avenue from a point fifty metres forward of the company, all the way to the barrier. Rockets slammed into the facades of the habs, bringing more buildings down. The collapses forced the Fists Exemplar into the open. Taking to the shelter of the craters, they maintained their fire on the enemy, but Thane could no longer see what effect, if any, they were having. He was shooting into explosions.

‘Pull back to the other side of the barrier,’ Thane ordered. ‘We’ll welcome them again there. Gunships, covering fire. Break this barrage.’

Aloysian slid into the same crater as Thane. ‘They’re concentrating their bombardment on the road.’

‘It’s working for them. They’re making it hard for us to move. Let them amuse themselves. At least they’re not advancing.’

‘If this is victory, it has a displeasing shape.’

‘Our victory conditions are the success of the mission.’ The truth of the words made them no less bitter. Aloysian was right. At this moment, the idea of locating the primarch felt abstract. Compounded humiliation was a reality.

Aloysian’s attention had shifted back to the orks’ tactics. ‘Why the road? The enemy has done nothing without reason.’

Thane looked behind. His battle-brothers were climbing over the rubble. ‘Let’s go,’ he said to Aloysian. ‘If they have a reason, it will do them no good in our absence.’

He made for the barrier, running through the barrage. On his left, Brasidas took a direct hit. The Space Marine vanished. The mist of his blood splashed against Thane’s helm. The ground shook with impacts. Fissures spread from crater to crater.

Too late Thane realised what the orks were doing.

With a massive tremor and a howl of shattering rock, the avenue gave way. It fell into the honeycomb of lava tunnels below. Weakened by the pounding of the bombardment, the tunnels collapsed too. The chain reaction spread. A gorge opened up, running through the centre of Laccolith. It swallowed the barrier. The ground vanished beneath Thane’s feet. The Fists Exemplar plunged into the depths.

Thane dropped twenty metres. He bounced off jagged ledges and landed on an uneven field of broken stone. The force of his fall punched through rock. He stood, servo-motors in his armour catching and whining. He looked up at the sheer walls surrounding the company. There was no sure route out.

He heard the bombardment stop. The rumble of engines replaced the roar of guns. The orks were closing in on the trap they had created.

The company drew together. Thane made for the tanks, but the fall had disabled the heavy armour. The tanks were immobilised. Even if they could manoeuvre, none could be extracted from the gorge except by airlift.

However, not all of the vehicles had been wholly destroyed in the fall. Some, at least, still had working guns.

‘Tactical squads,’ Thane voxed, ‘get to street level. Do what you can. Gunships, concentrate on the super-heavies. Hold them off. Destroy them if possible.’ He turned to his brothers. ‘We can fight or we can climb.’

‘Is that a choice?’ Kahagnis asked.

‘Not really.’ Unless they climbed, annihilation was inevitable.

He climbed on top of the nearest functioning turret. It belonged to the Predator *Scion of Roma*. ‘Let enough of us remain with the tanks to hold the enemy at bay. The rest of you, make for the far wall. Reach the top, then cover our retreat.’

His brothers rapped their fists against their chest-plates in salute and left. There were five guns that could be used. Venerable Brother Otho stayed as well: the Dreadnought could not climb, so he became the mobile artillery. The Whirlwind *Citadel’s End* could still move, and Aloysian took its controls with Scuris operating its rocket launcher. The bulk of the company retreated. The rear of the canyon was five hundred metres to the south. The collapse was deep, narrow and less than a kilometre long in total.

‘We are in a barrel,’ Aloysian voxed.

‘I know it,’ Thane replied.

The orks moved their super-heavies into position. The walker arrived first. It towered over the lip of the canyon. Its squat, conical shape having none of the majesty of the Titans. It was power embodied in its most brutal, savage form. In the excess of its massive cannon and the clusters of turrets, Thane nonetheless saw a mocking kind of genius. The behemoth was the ork spirit of war: crushing feet, crushing limbs, and crushing weaponry. Thane looked up from the perspective of the Imperium trampled beneath the boots of the greenskins.

Hatred fuelled his first shot.

The Predator’s shell exploded against the walker’s armour. The hit would have reduced battlements to powder. A crater smoked in the ork machine’s carapace. The beast’s cannon arm swung downwards as if the blow had meant nothing.

The gun barrel was as long as a Rhino. The shot was like a meteor impact. The shell struck the ground just ahead of *Scion of Roma* and the explosion lifted the front of the tank up, flipping the Predator onto its roof. Thane leapt from the turret in mid-arc. He landed and scrambled out of the way of its fall.

Thunderhawks and Xiphon interceptors strafed the ork machines. Secondary turrets on the walker retaliated, while the primary arms

remained pointed down. The massive totemic head, its eyes lit crimson, appeared to gaze into the canyon, unperturbed by the aerial assaults. Imperial autocannon fire took out smaller tanks. The battlefortresses and the walker maintained their positions and the steady bombardment. Dense clusters of anti-aircraft fire reached for the gunships.

Scuris unleashed the Whirlwind's battery of rockets, enveloping the head of the walker in flame. Its next shot went wild. As pulverised rock rained down on him, Thane pounded over the floor of the canyon. He jumped on top of *Citadel's End* as Aloysian drove forwards. The Techmarine headed for the cliff nearest the orks, below the range of the walker's cannon.

Battlefortresses and the smaller battlewagons arrived at the lip of the gorge. Infantry set up mortar positions and a deluge of fire fell upon the Fists Exemplar. The canyon became the boiling crater of a volcano. Identification runes flashed red and then black in Thane's retinal lenses. More brothers dying. A double explosion to the rear was another tank, blown up by a direct hit from the walker's huge cannon.

'Brother Aquino, what is your progress?' Thane voxed.

At the head of the battle-brothers climbing the south wall, Aquino said, 'Halfway there, Chapter Master. They haven't—'

Thunder and static howl cut him off. Electrical arcs fired across the gorge, stabbing at the vertical face. Thane heard the rumble of further rock falls. Another rune blinked and died.

*Citadel's End* fired again, but this time Aloysian targeted the top of the cliff instead of the ork machines. He created his own avalanche. The walker rocked forwards as the ground fell away, but its operators moved one of its huge legs in a great dragging step backwards and it staggered away from the edge. One of the battlefortresses wasn't fast enough. It pitched down, engine screaming, treads spinning uselessly as it fell. It turned on its side, then into a ponderous roll, hauled by its own tremendous mass. It fired again in mid-flight. The shell hit the cliff wall just above *Citadel's End*. Aloysian reversed, jouncing the Whirlwind off boulders and a cloud of dust billowed over the tank.

Thane left the roof. He ran through the dust to the darker mass of the battlefortress. It had landed upright. The treads were destroyed and its wheels threw up sparks as they tried to find traction on rubble, but its three layered turrets rotated southwards. They roared. Thane stared straight

ahead. He refused to acknowledge further losses. He would not permit them.

Behind him, *Citadel's End* fired again, eating at the ground of the ork positions, forcing them back. An energy gun exploded, filling the night with an emerald glare.

Thane pulled a melta bomb from his belt and ducked beneath the lowest cannon, scrambled over the spiked cylinder the fortress used as a siege shield, and climbed its hull. Firing his bolt pistol through a viewing slit, he was rewarded with a whining snarl of pain. He slapped the melta bomb to the top cannon, the largest, where the barrel met the turret. Then he jumped to the ground in front of the tank, daring the greenskins to take their anger out on a single enemy.

They took the bait.

The melta bomb flared then ate through the turret and barrel. The gun fired, and the battlefortress self-immolated. Molten heat reached for Thane. Burning chunks of hull spun past him.

This was a much better shape of victory.

He turned back towards *Citadel's End*. Even as he did, the orks settled into new positions and hit the canyon with another massive salvo.

'Aquino!' he shouted.

No answer.

He called again. Aquino answered, his voice tight with suppressed pain. 'They're blasting the cliff away from us, Chapter Master. Progress is slow. We are taking losses.'

'I have faith in you, brother.'

But he didn't in the situation. The orks were bringing forwards even more mortars, even more large guns. The foot soldiers lined the circumference of the gorge, shouting with laughter. Thane only saw them in glimpses between the eruptions and the flames. They were celebrants exulting over the pyre of their foe.

Thane would fight. Aloysian would fight. Aquino and the others would fight.

And they would die.

The vox scratched for his attention – a transmission on the wider command network. He caught up to the Whirlwind once more and opened the channel.

‘Tynora 7-Galliax,’ a mechanical voice said. ‘We are approaching your position, Chapter Master Thane.’

‘Your news is welcome, princeps.’

‘Our manoeuvre is thanks to yours, Chapter Master. The principal strength of the *Veridi giganticus* was drawn to you. The pressure on us was relieved. We come to return the favour.’

She spoke, and then new light tore the night. Blinding phosphor blasts illuminated the ork positions and burned the infantry. The perfect razor yellow of eradicator beams cut in from east and west, burning through the flanks of the enemy armour. Two battlewagons disintegrated. Their blasts took out the energy cannons nearby. The destruction spread.

‘All guns target the cliff top,’ Thane ordered.

*Citadel’s End*, Brother Otho and the immobilised Predators fired within seconds of each other. Concussive hammer blows tore a huge chunk of the ground away. The new avalanche stole the road surface from beneath the orks. The battlefortresses ceased fire as they reversed course, backing over the retreating infantry.

The walker took another step back. This time, it was too slow. The surface of the road collapsed beneath it. The walker plunged head-first, firing one more time as it dropped. The wild shell punched another crater behind Thane.

The canyon roared and echoed as the leviathan’s fall triggered another avalanche of rock and gravel. The monster came to a stop at the base of the canyon, half-buried by the slide. Its cannon arm was immobile. The left arm waved its gigantic saw. The blade buzzed in the air, hungry for targets. The body shook with internal explosions, but still lived.

‘Finish it,’ Thane ordered.

The guns of the Fists Exemplar lowered their aim. They fired as one, a choir of rage and vengeance. They targeted the head, which protruded well beyond the rock fall. The walker’s armour could not withstand such a concentrated assault, and the head blew apart. The devastated neck opened into an abyss of darkness and monstrous engineering. An inferno billowed out of the chasm as the machinery tore itself apart. The walker shook harder and harder as something vital and tremendously powerful was breached. Thane took cover behind a boulder.

The monster’s death shattered the night of the gorge, killing the dark with

burning day. It pulverised the rock that had buried the walker. Stone shards flew across the canyon with hurricane velocity. They whined over Thane's position like a swarm of insects.

Thane rose when the glow of the blast faded. Still more of the cliff face had collapsed. There was a slope now to the north. Too steep for *Citadel's End*, but not, perhaps, for the Dreadnought.

'Venerable Brother Otho,' Thane called.

'I am with you, Chapter Master.'

Aloysian and the other battle-brothers who had manned the guns left the vehicles. Together with Thane, they mounted the slope. When they reached the top, they found the rest of the company already engaged. In the midst of the broken city, the Fists Exemplar hammered the front ranks of the orks while the Mechanicus attacked the flanks. The orks pulled back, infantry falling, vehicles destroyed. The battlefortresses were more powerful than any single one of the Imperial vehicles deployed on Caldera, but they were not invulnerable. A line of Kataphron Breachers closed with the fortress on the eastern side of the avenue. Their torsion cannons turned the matter of its armour against itself, three simultaneous hits tearing its flank open. Brother Scaevola launched a rocket through the gap. The battlefortress died, fire pouring from the viewing slits of its turrets.

The command network was a cacophony of voices. The heaviest ork force was before Thane, but the army was so massive it was fighting across the city. There was desperation in the communications from the Astra Militarum. The mortals were fighting building to building. They were being taken apart.

They are still serving, Thane told himself. They are slowing the enemy.

And here, now, in this sector of Laccolith, the orks were losing ground. This was no feigned retreat. The orks raged. They hurled themselves at the Imperials, but it was their turn to find themselves in the kill-zone. The street hampered the movement of their massed numbers. The fire from in front, from the sides and above broke each wave of assault.

Thane saw a real victory taking form.

And then the form changed, dissolved, became terrible. At the far end of the avenue, ork reinforcements arrived. More battlefortresses. Two walkers.

The earth shook with their approach.

## SEVEN

### Caldera – Beyond Torrens

The Thunderhawks *Honour's Spear* and *Triumph of Himalazia* flew over the city. Koorland sat with Preco in the cockpit of *Honour's Spear*. Through the viewing blocks, he had a disturbingly complete view of Laccolith's agony. Rocket contrails, interlocking las-fire and explosions lit the night. The eroded skyline crumbled more with every second. The orks purged entrenched positions by razing entire regions. Preco avoided the walkers and the heaviest concentrations of enemy forces, and Koorland saw how much the manoeuvre cost him.

'You believe you are abandoning your brothers,' Koorland said.

'I understand the importance of the mission.'

'Your understanding has no bearing on your instincts, brother.'

'No,' Preco said after a minute. 'It does not.'

'You are not abandoning them. They are buying us the chance of victory. If we fought for them now, we would be throwing away their effort.'

'Their sacrifice, you mean.'

'Yes. Their sacrifice. A price your Chapter Master is willing to pay. If we are successful, I hope we will bring an end to the cost. Whatever happens, he has my thanks, as do you.'

Preco gave him a curt nod. 'As I said, I understand the necessity of this course of action. It is still difficult.'

I know what it is to lose brothers, Koorland thought. He said nothing. His losses did not matter in this moment. It was important that Preco express his unease in leaving the field while his company fought. Important to acknowledge that pain, so the Exemplar could focus all the more keenly on

the goal ahead.

Take us to the primarch, Koorland thought, and we will end this war.

The Thunderhawks climbed. The inferno of Laccolith dropped away. Preco swung around the worst of the struggles, and even then, crackling anti-aircraft energy slashed at the gunship.

‘They want us contained as badly as we wish to hold them,’ Koorland said.

‘A good sign,’ said Preco.

They left Laccolith behind. They flew east, then angled north as they approached a plateau. Fires guttered below. Koorland caught a glimpse of a ruined wall. Another settlement below, then, passed too quickly to tell if anything remained of it.

Preco used the twin volcanoes as beacons. Sporadic fire continued to track them from the jungle.

‘They’ve left sentries,’ Preco said, veering sharply to starboard as another gun targeted them. ‘Since when do orks stay behind when the main army moves?’

‘Since Ardamantua. Since these greenskins arose. Expect the worst always, brother. I’ve seen the worst, and I still underestimate their tactical acumen.’

*Honour’s Spear* and *Triumph of Himalazia* passed over the scarred jungle and onto the rocky terrain beyond. Ahead, the night raged. Gun and cannon fire. Bursts of flame. There was war there, on a smaller scale than in Laccolith. But no less brutal. No less desperate.

Koorland hoped the orks were as desperate as they seemed. The force left behind would have been enough on its own to take a militia-defended city. When the flames rose high, Koorland saw the silhouettes of tanks, the rush of warbikes. A large mass of infantry.

The Thunderhawks drew nearer. The confused actions of the orks became clear. There was no front line. There was no position they were attacking, and no opposing army. There were circular movements. The orks centred their attacks on a point, and the point kept moving. It cut slashes of destruction through the ork formations. Massive concussions, greater than any artillery shell, rippled out from that point.

‘Is that...?’ Preco began. He spoke softly, awed by something that could not yet be seen.

‘It must be,’ Koorland said, just as quiet. ‘That is where we must strike.’  
‘We can’t land.’

‘We are prepared.’ Koorland had ordered the two squads of the Last Wall to equip jump packs. ‘Come in as close and low as you can. We’ve had enough of attacking them from the outside. This is the epicentre. The enemy has expended great effort to keep us from there. Let the orks’ defeat begin with that failure.’

Preco dropped the nose of the gunship. The black shapes of the foothills rushed in.

Koorland voxed orders to the troops in both Thunderhawks. ‘Open the side doors. We jump into the midst of the cauldron.’

A line of energy cannons opened up at the foot of the last slope. They put up a coruscating wall of destruction.

‘They *really* don’t want us here,’ Preco grunted. Beams cut into the port side of the hull. *Honour’s Spear* slewed away, engines howling as Preco strained against the controls.

Smoke entered the cockpit. Koorland blinked through the squad readouts on his lenses. The runes were steady green across the board. To port, the *Triumph of Himalazia* was too close to the barrage. With no room to evade, it flew straight through the beams. Flames haloed its engines. It was flying, but dropping fast.

Preco looped the *Spear* around and pummelled the ground with autocannon rounds. A bright flash on the ground created a narrow gap. Preco took it. The gunship flew through the curtain of anti-air fire. It shuddered violently in flight. Koorland watched the yoke buck in Preco’s hands.

‘How long can you stay aloft?’

‘For as long as necessary. You’ll have air support.’

‘My thanks again, Brother Preco,’ Koorland said. He pulled the door of the cockpit open and joined the squad for the leap.

The Last Wall plunged to earth. The two squads leapt from the Thunderhawks, jet packs streaking fire. Their bolters were on full burst all the way down. They cut orks down during their flight, and landed with the force of vengeance. Koorland shattered the spine of a greenskin warrior, the impact of his mass and velocity snapping the brute’s armour. He stomped on the struggling ork’s head, crushing it against jagged volcanic

rock.

The Last Wall created a crater of flesh. The squads stood in a hole in the midst of the horde. The orks had been charging a few dozen metres to the north. For a moment, there was still a wall of xenos might between Koorland and the moving target. Confusion took hold as the orks came under attack from two points in their midst. Some of them turned to face the Last Wall. Others stayed focused on their first enemy.

For a moment.

A few seconds during which Koorland knew, but could not see, that he had reached his target. He knew what he was about to encounter, but the knowledge had no true weight. There was no visceral understanding. There could not be. He was still on one side of the barrier that separates belief in a legend from its experience.

He fired into the orks separating him from the legend. He and his brothers charged into the mass.

Koorland began to cross the barrier.

The moments passed. Belief met reality, and the shockwave killed dozens of orks.

Something struck a battlewagon. Koorland could see the upper portions of the hull from his position. There was the sound of a single blow and the vehicle stopped dead. The rear jerked upwards, as if the forward section had been driven into the ground. A concussion wave radiated outwards from the tank's position. The battlewagon exploded. Orks flew through the air. Koorland staggered as the wave hit him, a sudden hurricane. The blow scythed the enemy before him.

The space ahead of the Last Wall was clear. Surrounded by bodies, lit by the flames of the burning tank, the legend was there.

Time stuttered. Koorland's senses grappled with awe. His existence before his transformation into a Space Marine was a blank. The history of that earlier being was lost. So now, for the first time in his memory, he experienced what an unenhanced mortal felt at the sight of the Adeptus Astartes.

Vulkan was a colossus, more pillar than man. He was an icon carved of granite and night, immovable as a mountain, ferocious as lava. The deep green of his armour's scales made him a reptile sprung from the dreams

and fears of humanity's past. The forged flames of its design made him the fire of a planet's core. The skull of one beast adorned his shoulder guard. His cloak was the hide of another. He was a slayer of myth, and he was myth incarnate. His massive hammer pulsed and crackled with energy. Koorland could not imagine lifting it, never mind wielding it. He found it even more impossible to picture anything, be it ork, voidship or world, that could survive its strike.

It was all Koorland could do not to fall to his knees. He was not alone. He was surrounded by the stunned immobility of his battle-brothers.

They did not forget their training and leave themselves vulnerable to the enemy. They were frozen for the space of a single intake of breath, and the orks in their vicinity that still lived were incapacitated for much longer. But oh, the time of that breath stretched to infinity. Though Koorland had witnessed a moon open its jaws and roar, it was only now that he felt the true touch of the sublime. A breath, and his life was in a point of culmination. His existence was already divided into two irreconcilable halves by the destruction of the Imperial Fists. Now it broke in two again. This time, the far side of the crevasse was filled with the fiery light of glory.

The breath, and then war.

No words passed between Vulkan and the Last Wall. They would come later. Now there was the necessity of battle. Koorland looked up at the drake-helm and the infernal red of its lenses. Vulkan inclined his head in a nod. Then destruction came to the foothills of Caldera once more.

The orks closed in. They fought against a storm. The Last Wall formed a circle. They became a fist, a mailed gauntlet. The horde broke itself upon its spikes. Bolter shells punched through armour and flesh. Streams from flamers incinerated brutes who tried to close within melee distance. Monsters in piston-driven armour burned in their metal shells. They died standing, and became obstacles in the path of their kin.

Vulkan swung his hammer. Each blow was a meteor impact. The night flashed with the weapon's wrath. The earth trembled before its power. Braced now, Koorland kept his footing. The orks struggled forwards but were swept back again and again, and each time their ranks thinned. The terrain itself began to change. The battle shattered hard ridges to dust. Rivers of blood poured over arid stone. The softer lines of broken bodies

covered the jagged shapes of rock. The stench of death, burned and wet, reached through Koorland's grille. His frame vibrated with the pounding beat of the hammer. His blood rejoiced, caught by the rhythm of righteous annihilation.

*'More!' Vulkan bellowed at the orks. 'Send more! Still more! Will you never be enough?'*

The strength of twenty Space Marines and a single primarch shattered the orks' assault. The force that had remained to fight Vulkan had contained him, but no more. The orks had been unable to achieve victory. Now they could not avoid defeat. As the infantry numbers diminished, the greenskins tried to conquer through swiftness. The vehicles had more room to move. They could pick up speed, or as much as the rough terrain would allow.

They died all the more quickly.

Squads of bikers roared by in strafing runs. Koorland and the Last Wall lowered their aim, stitching the sides of the bikes with shells. They blasted through wheels, exploded fuel tanks. They turned the bikes into somersaulting death traps. Rolling balls of steel and fire collided with other drivers. It was destruction built on destruction. Vulkan swung his hammer sideways. The blow went through a bike and its rider without stopping. The ork machine might have been made of air.

To Koorland's astonishment, mortals joined in the fight. They were a small group, no more than a score. They wore ragged mining clothes and wielded lasrifles. They used the folds in the earth as cover, ducking down each time the hammer came down. They clutched the ground, weathering the wind and the shockwave, then popped up again to shoot at the orks. The few greenskins they brought down had no impact on the struggle. Their presence and their survival was a miracle. They fought for their planet when the only hope of victory lay in the hands of others.

They were a wonder.

Koorland looked at them with a kind of joy.

Four battlewagons circled the fight. Then they converged, riding over the ridges at such speed they almost overturned. Their turrets blazed at Vulkan. They were in each other's line of fire, and stray shells fountained earth before them. Two of them were burning as they closed in. Koorland pulled a Krak grenade from his belt. He turned his attention from the

slaughtered infantry to assist, but the tanks were already there.

Vulkan disappeared in the nexus of shell bursts. The glare faded, revealing his massive form leaping at the nearest battlewagon. A mountain sailed through the air. He landed on the front of the tank and his boots drove through its armour. The vehicle veered to the left. Vulkan raised his hammer over his head with both hands and brought it down, crushing the upper turret. The shockwave made Koorland's head ring. Metal cried in agony, and Vulkan was already charging at the next tank as the first exploded.

Koorland fought. He brought the enemy down. He was not distracted by Vulkan's actions. Yet he bore witness. And afterwards, when he thought of the battle, he could barely remember his own role. There was room in his memories only for the sight of a primarch's wrath.

Vulkan ran into a battlewagon at full speed. The impact halted the tank and its forward hull crumpled. The giant of myth took the vehicle apart with two blows, and their thunder was so huge, the ammunition blasts that followed were mere echoes.

The orks did not retreat. The last two battlewagons hurled themselves at the legend, and to oblivion. The legend was indestructible. The legend was bedrock and magma. He was tectonic strength and tectonic fury. Koorland had a vision of this world having given birth to its champion, of Caldera itself striking back at the orks in retaliation for the wounds it had suffered at their hands.

The storm passed. The enemy lay dead. The rounded, wide peak of the hill and the slopes on all sides were a vast open tomb. For the first time since the war began, Koorland looked upon defeated orks. The first small measure of justice for his slaughtered brothers had been exacted. Shattered and broken bones, all burned black, blended with each other in twists of pain. The flames in the corpses of vehicles burned low. Night returned, but not full dark. With the glare of war gone, a dimmer, more diffuse glow asserted itself. It came from the clouds. They reflected the glower from the craters of the volcanoes to the north.

And beyond them, much further, was the great bleeding of Caldera. The stolen crust still rose to the skies. At this distance, the huge masses were little more than angry red sparks falling upwards. But the light of their blood still reached this far.

The surviving mortals gathered behind Vulkan. There were fewer than when Koorland had first seen them. That any lived at all was almost beyond comprehension. They were an embodiment of hope.

Vulkan faced north. He removed his helm. His face was as dark as obsidian, hard as granite, noble as marble. His eyes were black with an anger more ferocious than the snarl of his helm. But when they turned to Koorland and the Last Wall, the anger was not for them. They were curious. And wary.

Koorland bowed low and dropped to one knee. So did all the brothers of the Last Wall.

‘Rise,’ Vulkan said, his voice deep as mountain roots. ‘I see the insignia of the Seventh Legion.’ He paused, frowning as if confused by the sight of the gathered warriors. Then he blinked. The frown passed as if the question had evaporated. ‘You are honoured sons of Dorn,’ he said.

Koorland stood.

‘I thank you for joining me in this struggle,’ said Vulkan. ‘Though I don’t imagine your presence is a coincidence.’

‘No, lord,’ Koorland answered. ‘We came in search of you.’

Vulkan cocked his head. ‘And you knew where to find me. I wonder how?’

‘Inquisitor Lastan Veritus told us where to look.’

‘Veritus.’ Vulkan spoke the name slowly. ‘I see.’ He looked thoughtful, not puzzled.

‘The Imperium has need of you, Lord Vulkan,’ Koorland said.

‘Does it.’ The primarch grunted. ‘I’m sure that is the belief.’ He raised his head, looking skywards as if he could see the stars. ‘I am doubtful. There will come a time when I must return.’ His voice was hollow. ‘There will come a war. This is not that time, or that war.’

‘Orks have stood in the Great Chamber of the Imperial Palace. An attack moon is in orbit over Terra. The worlds of the Imperium burn at the hands of an enemy who has made its home on Ullanor. If not now, if not for this war, then when?’

Vulkan’s eyes blazed. ‘Ullanor?’

Koorland nodded. He gestured to the warriors of the Last Wall. ‘Already, extreme measures have been necessary. The Successor Chapters to the Imperial Fists fight under a single command.’

‘Successor...’ Vulkan began. Again there was a moment of confusion, quickly dismissed. ‘Your command?’ he asked.

‘Yes. It is my burden and my honour as the last Imperial Fist.’

Vulkan’s eyes hardened. ‘Explain yourself.’

‘On Ardamantua, the orks exterminated my Chapter. Only I survived.’

Vulkan looked off into the distance. Koorland wondered what grim mysteries the primarch contemplated.

‘Ullanor,’ Vulkan said again. Deep beneath his calm, Koorland heard a stream of pain. The world’s name would be a more terrible echo of triumph turned to ashes for the primarch than for any other living human. ‘The Emperor destroyed the ork empire on that world.’ Though Vulkan spoke quietly, his voice still resonated through Koorland’s frame.

‘Now they have returned,’ Koorland said. ‘And threaten to destroy the Emperor’s work.’

Vulkan turned his attention to the other Space Marines. ‘Tell me who you are.’

‘We are the Last Wall,’ Eternity said. ‘We answered the call of Chapter Master Koorland. Terra will not fall on our watch, and the Imperial Fists will not vanish.’

‘So,’ Vulkan said to Koorland, ‘you maintain your charge, and rebuild that which has been shattered.’

‘I must.’

‘Yes. I have known your burden.’ He nodded to himself. ‘So. Tell me what you wish of me.’

‘Other Chapters are gathering on Terra as we speak.’ Koorland hoped that was true. ‘Lead us all to Ullanor. Under your command, we will destroy the Beast.’ He gestured to the Thunderhawks coming in to land. ‘We can depart immediately.’

‘No,’ said Vulkan.

Koorland tried to articulate a response. He had imagined not finding Vulkan. He had been forced to imagine the possibility of another defeat. He had not imagined the primarch’s refusal. His awe began to give way to anger.

Vulkan spoke again before Koorland could retort. ‘Not now,’ he said. ‘I accept Terra’s need. I will never turn from my duty to my Father. But my duty is here too.’ He raised his arm. He pointed north, to the distant pulse

of a world being taken apart. ‘I will not abandon Caldera. I swore an oath to protect it, and that oath is a thousand years old.’

‘Lord Vulkan,’ Eternity said, ‘there is little time.’

‘There never is. That changes nothing.’

‘Will you sacrifice Terra for Caldera?’

Vulkan stared at Eternity. The fire of his gaze was cold, and as hard as judgement. He took a single step to the right, putting the mortals in Eternity’s direct line of sight. ‘You have seen the people of this world. You have seen them fight. You have seen their spirit. Will you abandon them?’

‘No,’ Koorland said. ‘We will not.’ The primarch was right. To abandon the spirit shown on Caldera to oblivion would be a crime. ‘We will fight for Caldera, and we will fight for Terra.’

Vulkan’s judgement turned his way, and Koorland experienced his second victory of the day.

‘Yes,’ Vulkan said. ‘I have seen the calculus of expediency. I have seen its cost. And its corruption. This world too is the Imperium. We will not save the Emperor’s work by consigning a portion of it to destruction. That is the wrong sort of sacrifice. One that is not for us to make.’

‘Lead us, lord,’ said Koorland. ‘We will follow.’

Sacrifice, Zerberyn thought. He stood in the librarium of the *Dantalion*. Around him were the chronicles of the Fists Exemplar. Tomes and parchment and data-slates reached back a millennium and more, to the very founding of the Chapter. Zerberyn was in the midst of recorded honour and pride, struggle and victory. And sacrifice.

He thought of the sacrifices he and his brothers had made over the centuries. He thought of their recent ones. And he thought of the sacrifice he had imposed on others. On other loyal servants of the Imperium. And upon its citizens.

He was before the great armourglass viewport of the librarium. It was a tall oval, reaching from deck to ceiling. The battle-barge’s position would have been a low-anchor orbit over Prax, if Prax still existed. Zerberyn gazed at the emptiness that was his work, the nothing that was his burnt offering upon the altar of victory.

My crime, he thought.

His chest burned with guilt and anger.

‘That is a lesson,’ said a hard voice. It grated like an iron door. It seemed to carry its own echo, as though there were two speakers, the second voice coming from within the first, slithering into the real from a squirming abyss.

Zerberyn looked over his shoulder as Kalkator walked down the central aisle of the librarium. The Iron Warrior stopped a few paces away.

‘You’re returning to your ship?’ Zerberyn ignored what Kalkator had said. It was too close to a thought he had had been struggling to repress.

‘We are. I believe we are of one mind on matters of immediate strategy.’

‘Yes.’ Kalkator and his command squad had come aboard after the death of Prax for joint planning. The short-term necessities were clear. The original purpose in coming to Prax had not been achieved. Both ships still needed repair.

‘I’m sure you have doubts.’

Zerberyn grunted. ‘You might say that.’

Doubts? How could he have anything but doubts? Unthinkable events were succeeding each other without pause. Traitor Space Marines walked the corridors of a vessel commanded by the sons of Dorn. They were not prisoners. They were not under guard. They had been invited, and they left freely.

And now the Fists Exemplar were going to follow the Traitors. Kalkator had made contact with an outpost under Iron Warriors control. Communications were fragmentary, but it appeared the planetoid had not yet come under ork attack. It was the best destination, despite a journey through the warp that would be longer than ideal, given the damage to the vessels. Kalkator said he could guarantee safe harbour for the Fists Exemplar. Zerberyn could not offer that from an Imperial base.

He wondered if even his ship alone could approach such a port with impunity. He thought not. Not now.

‘Are you questioning your choice?’ Kalkator asked.

‘Of our destination?’

‘No.’ Kalkator nodded to the viewport. ‘Of your actions.’

He should turn his back on the traitor. He should not answer at all. If he must answer, he should say *No*. Whatever that implied, at least it would not reveal indecision. Doubt. Weakness. Instead, he obeyed the spirit of the perverse, and he confided in Kalkator.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘How could I not?’

To Zerbery’s surprise, he was glad of his response.

‘Exactly,’ Kalkator said. ‘How could you not?’ His scarred lips parted in a grim smile. He was a gargoyle, and worse. Zerbery had seen him fight. He knew the brutality that lurked within the Iron Warrior. But the smile was one of understanding. ‘What were your options?’ Kalkator continued. ‘Kill your allies, or leave the world to the orks.’

‘The choice was impossible.’

‘Yet you made the correct one. The orks have lost a world, along with resources and supplies.’

Zerbery glanced at the absence of Prax. ‘The population...’ he began. He stopped when he heard Kalkator snort.

‘What of them? Are they better off dead than under the orks?’ It was clear Kalkator found Zerbery’s expression of concern ridiculous. His logic, though, was sound. ‘Die quickly or slowly. Those were their options. You gave them mercy.’ He snorted. ‘They were weak and didn’t deserve it. You were generous.’

‘The choice was impossible,’ Zerbery agreed, trying to quieten his doubts.

‘I believe you have a better understanding of us now, then.’

‘What do you mean?’

Kalkator’s smile turned bitter. ‘You should come aboard the *Palimodes*. Peruse our librarium. Enlighten yourself. Learn the history of the Fourth Legion. It is a chronicle of impossible choices and thankless wars. While the other Legions reaped the glory and the murals, we struggled in the mud. Again and again and again, the hard decisions and sacrifice. Always sacrifice. And for what? Tell me honestly. You just struck an important blow for the Imperium. Do you expect gratitude?’

The answer came easily. ‘No.’

‘Condemnation, perhaps?’

Again, no hesitation. ‘Yes.’ He had ordered the killing of loyal forces.

‘And were you wrong?’

‘No.’ To his shock, even this answer was easy. No, he was not wrong. There had not truly been a choice at all. He had done what the war had made necessary. His doubts became anger at the injustice of being condemned for preserving the Imperium.

‘No, you were not wrong,’ said Kalkator. ‘And neither were we, time after time after time, until we finally realised our sacrifices were meaningless.’ He seemed about to say something else. Instead, he shook his head. ‘I must return to the *Palimodes*. We will speak again.’

Kalkator left. Zerberyyn watched him go, thinking of sacrifice, feeling his anger grow into rage. Just before Kalkator disappeared through the librarium door, Zerberyyn thought he heard the Iron Warrior’s voice once more. He could not have, because the sound seemed to be at his shoulder. It was less than a whisper, and more profound than a shout. It was a single word.

*Brother.*

# EIGHT

## Caldera – The Ascia Rift

‘They need more time?’ He was bleeding. His ship was bleeding. Rodolph started to laugh. Pain ripped through his torso and he stopped. At least his vision cleared again.

Groth was in vox-contact with Weylon Kale. ‘Yes, admiral,’ she said. ‘The shipmaster has heard from Chapter Master Koorland. They have made contact with the primarch.’ While she spoke, she kept her eyes on the tacterium screens and the oculus. Another Mechanicus ship exploded, taking an ork attack ship with it but leaving a gap in the *Finality*’s flanking escort. ‘Full fire starboard,’ Groth ordered.

Rodolph reached for the vox-unit. ‘Shipmaster Kale,’ he said, ‘why is the strike force not extracting?’

‘The campaign is not finished,’ Kale answered. ‘The primarch is leading an assault to take Caldera back from the orks.’

Impossible, Rodolph thought. He stopped himself before speaking. He realised he was confronting two different impossibilities in Kale’s words. Purging the world of this ork army was one. Before long, the greenskins would destroy what was left of the Imperial fleet. Then there would be nothing to prevent overwhelming reinforcements from reaching planetside. The second impossibility was the presence of Vulkan.

*He has been found.* Rodolph had believed in the necessity of the mission. He had not believed in its success.

*Vulkan has been found.*

The impossible was true. His duty, therefore, was simple. He looked at Groth, who was waiting for him to perform that duty. He had no doubt she

would have him declared unfit if he did not. She would be right to do so.

‘Tell Chapter Master Koorland we fight until victory,’ Rodolph told Kale.

‘Gladly. The Emperor guide your hand, admiral.’

Rodolph straightened. His heart skipped and hammered, strained by the stimms, yet he felt stronger. He swallowed his blood, tasting iron, tasting determination.

An ork ram ship punched through the corvette *Sainted Blade*. The *Blade*’s midsection disintegrated, her remains exploding just as the greenskin vessel was leaving the corpse behind. The blast was too much for the ram ship’s weaker rear shielding. Explosions worked their way forwards along its hull. The ork ship maintained its course for the *Finality*’s superstructure even as it began to come apart. It streaked over the battleship’s stern and travelled over the hull, slowing but inexorable.

‘Raise the bow!’ Rodolph shouted.

There was no evasion possible. He had his choice of disasters. He sought the lesser one.

The *Finality* lifted. Rodolph watched the oculus. The movement was imperceptible at first. The ram ship ate up the distance to the superstructure. Too slow, the admiral thought. He braced for the fire and the end.

Visible movement. Graceful. Massive. So gradual. The ram ship’s flight was low, very low. The spires of the hull made contact with the belly of the ork vessel. That was enough. Its nose dropped. Barely more than a fireball of travelling metal, it came down onto the *Finality*’s hull, striking a few hundred metres from the base of the superstructure.

Rodolph held the command pulpit and leaned against it just before impact. He remained standing as the hammer blow resounded through the battleship. The depth of the tremors told him how deep the wound was. The oculus showed everything forward of the superstructure disappear in the expanding firestorm. Across the bridge, the dull voices of servitors overlapped as they called out damage reports. Groth, face grim, tapped at the tactarium screens until a clear summary emerged. Rodolph watched the casualty figures hit the tens of thousands and keep climbing. Power was down across two-thirds of the ship. The void shields collapsed. For close to half a minute they remained down, and ork cannon shells opened more gaps in the armour. When they returned, the shields were at less than

forty per cent of their strength.

A rent half a kilometre wide had been torn in the hull. Atmosphere poured into the void. Bulkheads could not seal. Amidships, the top ten decks vented completely.

Still the casualty numbers climbed. Vacuum killed some fires. Others kept spreading, finding more air to burn. Rank upon rank of weapon batteries went dead.

‘Steering?’ Rodolph asked.

‘We still have it,’ said Groth. ‘Barely.’

And he was still standing, breathing and thinking. Still commanding. Barely. That would suffice too.

‘Maintain course for the greenskins’ moon,’ Rodolph said. He took a rattling breath. He vowed he would remain conscious until his vessel’s dissolution. ‘Keep them worried.’

Laccolith groaned with war. It burned. It cried out to wrathful night.

The Fists Exemplar split up, racing along the sides of the avenue towards the walkers. The Mechanicus guns angled their beams towards the monsters’ heads. Along the rooftops of the buildings that still stood, and on the crests of rubble mounds, the skitarii gathered and attacked the ork infantry. The walkers fired to the left and right, bringing down more structures. The power of the ork machines was overwhelming. Yet there could be no retreat from them. There was only attack.

We fight for time, Thane told himself, conscious of how little remained to him. Each second is a victory.

Then the walkers stopped firing. They took a step back. Thane blinked. It was as if the leviathans were retreating before the Fists Exemplar.

‘Chapter Master...’ Aloysian said.

‘I know, brother.’

The walkers turned around. Footstep by thunderous footstep, they headed back down the grand avenue. Beyond them came the snarl of vehicle engines pushed to the limit. The infantry was on the run. The orks were leaving Laccolith faster than they had arrived.

‘How can this be a retreat?’ said Aloysian.

‘It isn’t.’ Thane understood. ‘They’re racing to stop the Last Wall.’

The *Honour's Spear* and *Triumph of Himalazia* flew between the Ascia Rift's guardian volcanoes. Lava flowed sullenly down the slopes of the peaks. Their eruptions were a slow, constant release of pressure, preventing greater cataclysm. Beyond them, the rift opened up. It was a canyon thousands of metres deep, and less than two thousand across at its widest point. The Ascia valley floor was bright with the light of xenos industry.

Koorland stood with Vulkan at the open side door of the Thunderhawk. His eyes widened as the gunships dropped lower and the details of the construction became clearer. 'Have they done this only since the assault began?'

Vulkan nodded. 'I would have known, otherwise. They must have used more troops here than in the invasion itself.'

'Did they know you were here?'

The idea the orks knew more about the location of the primarch than did the Adeptus Astartes was appalling. He forced himself to ask it. He must not consider anything beyond the reach of this enemy.

'Not before they arrived, I think. I was aware of something happening in this region first. Then the attack on Laccolith began.'

'The invasion was a distraction?'

'An effort to keep me from here, at the least. A successful one until now.'

Koorland felt the scale of the conflict and the tactics on Caldera sink in further. Millions of orks deployed to counter a single warrior. And the orks had known to do this.

'Still lower,' he voxed Preco. 'Get their attention.'

The ork facility occupied the full width of the rift. It ran for dozens of kilometres north and south. Conduits, each ten metres thick, plunged into the bedrock and ran into power junctions the size of manufactoria. Chimneys rose half the height of the canyon. They spewed smoke and ash. Their mouths glowed red. Koorland stared. He pointed. 'Are those chimneys doing what I think they are?'

'Yes,' Vulkan replied. 'They are dagger wounds in the flesh of Caldera.' His anger smouldered like the magmatic light from the chimneys. 'The orks have pierced the crust. They are using the energy of this world to power its own destruction.'

Even more immense conduits ran from the junctions towards a towering

central point in the distance. The grand nexus was twice again as big as the other structures. To Koorland's eyes, it was simultaneously manufactory and a single machine. Its conical form suggested the ork versions of the Titans, but many orders of magnitude larger. It had extrusions resembling arms, but instead of cannons, the articulations released energy one moment, and in the next fed the searing light back inside its metal walls.

Pulsing arteries of incandescent blue and green and white ran from the nexus and up the rift walls. Koorland followed them with his eyes. Lining the top of the canyon, at the end of each line of power, were flaring, arcing points. After some flashes, he could just make out the shapes of huge energy coils.

Everywhere he looked, he saw the generation and deployment of inconceivable force. The engineering violated any principles he knew, yet it worked.

'What is this?' he finally asked.

'The means of murder,' Vulkan said. 'Power is created and controlled here. It flows north.'

Koorland understood. 'This is part of their gravity weapon.'

It was how the orks were taking Caldera apart and sending its pieces up to become part of the attack moon. The technology required a planetside base as well as the device used on the orbital base. The orks were not simply lashing the planet with their gravitic whips. They were controlling the ascent of the masses.

'You will doubtless see more evidence of the crime further to the north,' said Vulkan.

The passage of the two Thunderhawks was rapid, and it took several seconds for the orks to react. Turrets sprang to life across the installation. Vehicles and troops mobilised in the spaces between structures and conduits. Preco dared the fire and took the *Honour's Spear* even lower, flying between chimneys. The anti-air fire was cautious by ork standards. They were taking care not to destroy their great machine.

It was moments later, with the nexus looming closer, that Koorland learned just how fast the orks were reacting to the incursion. Thane contacted him on the command network. 'The orks are pulling out of Laccolith,' he said. 'They're heading back north at full speed.'

'Good,' said Koorland. 'They're afraid of what we'll do.' The huge

moves of the game were occurring once more. An entire army mobilising to deal with two aircraft. At last, the Imperium had the initiative in the war, forcing the orks into a reactive mode.

‘We are in pursuit,’ said Thane.

‘Good.’ Koorland relayed the news to Vulkan, then contacted Arouar. He described the installation.

‘Impressive,’ the tech-priest dominus said. ‘The possibilities it offers are considerable.’

‘Not for data collection,’ said Koorland. ‘The only focus here is the pursuit of victory. I hope there is no chance for misunderstanding.’

There was a slight pause. Then Arouar said, ‘None.’

‘I’m glad to hear it. Any contribution the Mechanicus can make would be welcome.’

There was no pause this time. Koorland thought Arouar was speaking more quickly, the pace of his inflectionless words increasing with excitement. ‘We are a long way from having mastered the gravitic technology of the *Veridi giganticus*. Nonetheless, we know enough for me to hypothesise an intervention. It is the primarch’s purpose to break the *Veridi* control over the weapon?’

‘It is.’

‘Then I urge you, Lord Commander, not to destroy the installation itself. We will attempt a field experiment.’

‘Thank you, dominus. I know you will reward our trust.’

‘We will, Lord Commander.’

The nexus loomed closer, a hulk of dark metal, furnace blasts of flame, and explosive energy. The Thunderhawks came in even lower, below the range of movement of many of the turrets. They angled away from the front of the nexus, heading for the eastern edge of the installation, then turned north again just before the cliffs.

Vulkan looked at Koorland. ‘Fight well, son of Dorn,’ he said. ‘Your actions honour his name, and I will tell him so.’ He stepped out of the door before Koorland could ask him what he meant.

The primarch dropped into the night, a dark meteor of noble wrath.

Vulkan hit the earth fifty metres from the nearest conduit. He was in the darkness outside the installation, and the searchlights were all trained on

the departing gunships. The rumble of industry and the bedrock groans it elicited from Caldera had covered the sound of his impact. He crouched in the small crater of his landing, motionless as a boulder, and waited. The conduits rose from the rock for twenty metres, then ran straight into the nexus. Its near wall was half a kilometre away. He caught glimpses of the ork forces mobilising for its defence as they passed underneath the conduits. Their numbers were difficult to gauge from his position, but he knew they would be high, and the physical defences of the nexus would be considerable. The orks had devastated a continent to keep him from the rift. The most sensitive point in the canyon would be protected like nothing else in the system except the attack moon itself.

The Thunderhawks passed from his sight. The wait stretched. Vulkan was patient. He could wait centuries for the fated moment of action. On this night, though, he felt the impatience of anger. The moment of Caldera's salvation approached, but still the planet bled, still the monstrous act of engineering continued.

*But it ends tonight. Let that suffice for now.* And it did. He must wait for the necessary turn of the war, and so he would. He found his way back to calm through his anger. He had much practice in this. Necessary calm was forged and tempered as surely as any weapon, and hardened into cold, unbreakable steel.

Over the centuries, Vulkan had not been unaware of the currents at work in the Imperium. The divisions, the corruption, the Emperor's dream turning black with ash. Vulkan's disgust vied for pre-eminence with his grief. When Terra called for help, it was hard for him to hear his Father's voice. He heard the cries of politicians, of petty connivers and their toxic power games.

*Father, don't you see what is happening? Why do you do nothing?*

But the orks had returned to Ullanor. That was grave beyond the comprehension of any Terran mortal.

Then there was Koorland. In his voice, Vulkan heard something better than the squalling of the High Lords. He *did* hear the echo of his Father, in Koorland's absolute allegiance to preserving the work of the Emperor. The last Imperial Fist had come to Caldera at the head of a force that united Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes, the Mechanicus and the Imperial Guard. There was unity of purpose, and commitment to that purpose. And

Koorland was capable of seeing that this purpose extended beyond immediate, rigidly defined goals. Vulkan declared that Caldera must be saved, and Koorland agreed. He agreed because he understood *why* this was necessary. Vulkan saw something precious in the new Chapter Master. Emerging from destruction, he had forged something strong. Koorland embodied a form of hope.

So Vulkan waited, and he prepared for the final battle for Caldera, and the greater war that waited beyond.

The Thunderhawks dropped the squads of the Last Wall at the northern end of the installation, flew on, then turned back to provide air support, joined by Hemisphere in the *Deathblow*. Koorland began the assault on the installation's defences.

The wall was high and many metres thick. It was a patchwork of iron, plates and girders slapped together with speed and so much excess that the barrier would have stopped almost any artillery barrage. The Ascia Rift narrowed again here, and the ground rose steeply, choking off the canyon for several kilometres before opening up again. A large force would be caught in a bottleneck, movements hampered, working against itself.

Against the squads of the Adeptus Astartes, the wall was worse than meaningless. It was a liability. They punched their way through its base with melta charges. The Thunderhawks and the Storm Eagle hammered its ramparts with assault cannons, tearing apart the first of the ork defenders. The gunships strafed the wall repeatedly, holding the greenskins' attention and preventing them from dealing with the threat below. In less than a minute, the Space Marines were inside the wall, out of reach of the enemy. The cannon fusillades continued, drawing the horde to that point, to the visible threat, away from the control nexus.

'Minimise the damage to the wall,' Koorland ordered the gunship pilots. 'We want to keep it intact.' It had been built to keep attackers outside the facility. Now it would keep the orks inside.

Two more melta bombs, and the tunnel was complete. Its sides glowed, still half-molten, as the squads reached the downslope exit they had created. Before them, the orks were already massed in the thousands. The canyon was wider on this side of the wall, though still narrow enough to reduce the orks' advantage of numbers. The horde was deep and furious, a

river of brute energy flowing between the towering conduits and sparking generators. The orks met the Last Wall with a hail of shells and fire.

Koorland and the front row crouched to give their brothers behind a clear field of fire. His squad sent focused streams of bolter fire into the foe. At the same time, Aloysian used his plasma cutter servo-arm to begin a second tunnel that began at right angles to the first, then turned south again to create a second exit. Both squads hit the orks, turning foot soldiers to bloody pulp as fast as they ran up. The orks had small targets. The Space Marines had a tide of xenos flesh before them. Every shot hit.

‘No heavy vehicles,’ Eternity grunted. He exchanged magazines so smoothly there was no interruption to the rhythm of his fire.

‘Not yet,’ said Koorland. ‘Hard to bring them forwards on this slope. They’ll be waiting for us further down.’

‘And for once they’ll be trying to move around structures they don’t want to damage.’

‘Exactly. Let them wait, or come to us.’

The orks closed in on the wall. The mass of infantry reached its base. The Space Marines pulled back a few steps inside the tunnels. The orks had no line of fire without exposing themselves. They took the risk. The greenskins charged the breaches again and again, dying every time. The war became a portrait of grinding immobility. Blood flowed over the rocky ground, and bodies burned. Deeper into the facility, engines roared with frustration. Guns beyond Koorland’s sight launched shells to no effect. They could not come close enough for targets, and the orks still believed they must preserve their wall.

Keep believing that, Koorland thought. Until we’re ready to destroy you with truth.

Vulkan waited. He was an unmoving shadow in the night, a stone among many. He read the flow of the green tide. He heard combat break out to the north. The howls of the orks moved further and further in that direction.

Vulkan waited. He was part of the landscape. There was no threat to the orks here. They had no reason to linger. The danger came from Koorland. The greenskins must protect their great machine from the enemy knocking on the wall.

Vulkan waited. Minutes passed. They turned into an hour. Combat raged,

and he took no part, the better to prepare a terrible blow.

Vulkan waited. He thought about the main force of orks in Laccolith. He visualised the brutalised landscape between the city and the Ascia Rift. He pictured the news of the attack on the installation reaching the army. The response. The desperate drive back. He calculated the time of arrival. He listened to Koorland's updates on the battle. Eventually, the orks would decide to bring down their wall. He found the balance between the charge coming from the south and the siege in the north. He located the fulcrum of the war. The point upon which a hammer would shatter a blade with a single blow.

Vulkan struck.

# NINE

## Caldera – The Ascia Rift

Vulkan rushed the gate of the command nexus. He held the great hammer Doomtremor high over his head. Alarms whooped with savage, rusted voices as he approached. The immense cone shimmered, its shape flickering and distorting as its protective force field pulsed and surged. Within the field, before the gate, a line of orks in heavy armour raised chainaxes. They braced for combat, but their jaws were open in mocking laughter. They did not expect a lone human to pass through the field.

Vulkan hit the invisible barrier with all his velocity, all his mass, and all the strength of his hammer. The orks learned that energy itself could scream. The force field flashed white. The shriek of a hundred tortured generators pierced the air. Vulkan raised Doomtremor with both hands then brought it down again before the glare had faded. The shield howled red, then violet. The orks at the gate covered their eyes, dazzled by the brutality of light.

Vulkan was relentless. With each blow of the hammer, the earth shook. Thunder cracked reality into hard, broken edges. The shockwave radiated across the installation. Conduits crumpled at its passage. They burst, spewing geysers of fire.

*Boom. Boom. Boom.* The beat of judgement, of the end of feral empires. Vulkan swung, channelling all his fury. He swung, and he was the anger of Caldera. His cloak billowed in the hurricane of his creation. He swung, and half a kilometre away, the tremors unleashed by his wrath felled a chimney. The tower swayed. At its base, stone crumbled and iron snapped. The chimney came down, dropping vertically and then forward, crushing

generators below it. The night exploded with unleashed, coruscating energy. Lava flowed from the shattered base, spreading across the canyon floor. A dull orange-red glow lit the sides of surrounding structures.

The damage spread, but the nexus resisted. The power in the installation did not falter. Vulkan had not expected it would. Ork construction piled excess upon redundancy. It would take an even greater cataclysm than this to destroy the great machine. Control was what he would wrest from the hands of the orks.

Strike. Strike. Strike. A terrible accumulation, the rhythm unbreakable as the laws of the universe. At the edge of his vision, Vulkan saw orks rushing at him. The greater part of the defenders were at the wall, dealing with Koorland's incursion. Perhaps now they had realised they had been diverted. Perhaps they would turn from that battle and head back towards the centre of the complex. They would be too late to disrupt his attack. Those who remained were too few to make a difference. They were not even a distraction. The shockwaves knocked them back. The tremors hurled them to the ground.

Doomtremor flashed, its rage the extension of Vulkan's soul, and it shattered the force field. A prismatic explosion surrounded the nexus. The gigantic arms jerked, their energy arcs rising to the clouds in their agony. A cluster of explosions opened a rent along the top third of the cone. The night became a howling strobe of light and dark. The installation roared. An invader had breached its defences. A great danger had come.

Vulkan had come.

He strode forward. Each step was grounded. He felt the heart of Caldera reach up through his feet, through his body. The world embraced its avenger.

The orks charged. They were as tall as Vulkan and even more massive in their armour.

'This world is under my protection,' he snarled. 'Trouble it no more.'

He swung the hammer sideways. One blow was enough. Armour shattered like eggshells. Bodies burst and burned.

Behind him, howls of distress and anger from more defenders, too few and too late. The chorus of alarm engulfed the complex. It was the fanfare of xenos defeat.

The primarch stood before the gate. He slammed the hammer against its

centre. The iron slab, ten metres high, flew apart.

Vulkan entered the nexus. It was composed of a single vast space, a cathedral of riotous technology. Banks of coils the size of plasma drives rose toward the inner peak. Energy arced between them, creating a crackling web intense enough to fry half a continent. Huge cables from the exterior fuelled the banks with still more energy, while conduits fed the heat of Caldera's mantle to the machine. At the centre of the cone was a pillar half the height of the structure, and fifty metres wide. It supported the control mechanisms. Scores of orks moved back and forth between monumental levers and dials. A huge greenskin engineer stood above them all on a dais, surrounded by a tangle of sparking machinery. There, Vulkan thought, was the heart of Caldera's martyrdom. That was what he had come to destroy.

He took in the disposition of the nexus and his target in a fraction of a second. The ork engineer evaluated him in the same moment. Vulkan took a step forward, and the inner defences activated.

The turrets had a precision Vulkan had never encountered in orks before. The need to preserve the control nexus governed their function. They caused no damage to the machinery. There were dozens of them, and they all fired on the primarch. If their rotation brought the precious mechanisms within their line of fire, they fell silent until their guns had a clear bead on the primarch once more.

They hit him with a torrent of energy beams. The concentrated strength of a gas giant's thunderstorm exploded against his chest. It forced him to take a full step back. He planted his legs and leaned into the attack. His breastplate began to glow. Lightning surrounded him as he moved forward against power that would have incinerated a Leman Russ. One step, then another. He held Doomtremor before him. It absorbed many of the hits, its head flaring and sending the excess energy outward. Vulkan directed it at the engineer. The ork's personal force field flashed in turn. The beast raged as the onslaught did no more than slow the primarch.

Vulkan advanced. His armour's interior temperature rocketed upward. He was inside an active volcano. A mortal's flesh would have started to burn. He marched on, implacable, a continental plate on the move. He passed between the immense coils. He was midway towards the pillar.

He realised the ork engineer was not shouting. It was laughing. The beast

pulled a lever.

The weight of a planet fell on his shoulders. He withstood the crushing force for several seconds, and then it brought him to his knees. The ork had turned the gravity weapon against him. The greenskin hurled mountains at the sky, and now it forced Vulkan down. His lungs flattened. Drawing a breath was an act of supreme strength. He growled, denying the force that sought to grind his bones to dust. He would not capitulate. He would rise. He would advance.

A power that had destroyed worlds held him fast.

Then it reversed.

He flew upward. The invisible hand whipped him against the slanted wall near the top of the cone and the impact dented the metal beneath him. Unseen mountain walls came together with him in between. His arms were flat against the surface. He strained to bring them forward. It was all he could do to keep his grip on Doomtremor. The ork laughed again, adjusted the controls, and slammed Vulkan to the floor, a meteor slaved to the greenskin's will. Before Vulkan could get his bearings, he was flying once more. The battering and speed blurred his sense. Whether he was smashed against the wall or the floor, the crushing never relented. It grew stronger. He felt the crack of bones.

He was trapped in the fist of Caldera, the planet's own strength turned against its will to destroy its defender.

The command nexus was visible from the wall. The structure was kilometres away, but its bulk loomed over everything around it. Now it flashed and pulsed. It cried out under the primarch's assault. The orks reacted to its agony. They paused in their struggle to reach the breached defences. Koorland's force kept up their bolter fire, killing dozens more in the moment of the pause. The orks milled about in momentary confusion, then began to retreat down the slope. They turned their back on the Last Wall.

'They realise we are a diversion,' Aloysian voxed.

'Then we must be more than that,' Koorland answered, speaking to the full squads. 'The primarch must complete his mission. Ours is to keep the orks away from the nexus. We must be the threat they cannot ignore. Stop them, brothers. At any cost.'

With a roar, the Last Wall charged from the tunnels. The Thunderhawks and Storm Eagle flew low down the rise, cannons and missiles hitting deep into the ork ranks, angling in for runs at the tanks. The two squads of veterans ploughed into the enemy rearguard. 'Forward!' Koorland shouted. 'We are the gladius! Stab it into the heart of the foe.'

Bolter fire annihilated the flesh ahead of him. The squad formation was narrow: two warriors abreast, sending punishing fire out on all sides. They were running downhill, with the urgency of desperate rage. The greenskins fell like chaff in the wind, before them and to either side. For a few more seconds, the orks tried to ignore the Space Marines, but too many were dying. Their speed was hampered by their numbers. The Last Wall moved faster by killing obstacles. Koorland's double gladius strike sank deeper and deeper into the horde.

The orks began to turn again. The wound was too deep for them to ignore. The green tide sought to close over the heads of the Space Marines.

Koorland slowed to a stop. With bolter and chainsword he killed his way through muscle and iron. His foes lost distinction. It was as if he fought a single ork, killing it endlessly. He fought according to the needs of each second. Block a descending axe with his blade. Shoot the brute through the chest. Turn and blast another through the head as it tried to flank him. Absorb the blow on his right. Retaliate with chainsword grinding through chest and heart.

The rage of the orks grew. Perhaps their desperation too. The infantry close in began to drop, killed by the gunfire of the ranks behind. A hail of heavy-calibre bullets pounded the squads. A rocket struck the ground a few metres to the right. It was almost a direct hit on Absolution. The blast shattered his helm and he staggered, his face badly burned. Eternity supported him and he kept fighting.

'Brothers,' Koorland called, 'we fight for a greater purpose and a greater victory. Hold the foe, and the primarch will save Caldera. Salvation here means salvation for Terra. And that is a victory beyond sacrifice!'

As he spoke, he felt the truth was speaking through him. Sacrifice was a given in the existence of the Adeptus Astartes. It was the inevitable end of duty. There was no regret in such an end, but there was in meaningless sacrifice. That was no small part of the shadow of Ardamantua. The Imperial Fists had been thrown away. Their annihilation had served no

purpose beyond the amusement of the Beast.

So he had thought.

He saw a different truth now. One whose reality was not assured, but he would willingly die to make it a certainty. He saw a chain leading from Ardamantua: the disaster becoming the means of uniting the Successors, the lesson he learned there fuelling his determination to call the other Chapters to Terra. Link after link of steel purpose, leading to this moment on Caldera. If he fell now but Vulkan succeeded, the defence of the Imperium would be taken up by the legend it needed. If his sacrifice led to the purge of the orks from Ullanor, that would be a reason to rejoice.

‘Fight for Vulkan!’ Koorland exhorted. ‘His victory will be the Imperium’s salvation!’

He stormed into the ork fire, slamming into the body of the horde again. He smashed a foot soldier to the ground, crushed its skull with his boots and decapitated the next ork beyond. And then, coming up the slope, he saw a trio of hulking shapes. They were boxy, clanking monstrosities bristling with weapons and mechanical arms. They were grotesque xenos mockeries of Dreadnoughts, and they had come to accept Koorland’s sacrifice.

The Adeptus Mechanicus forces split off to the east and west at the volcanic gateway to the Ascia Rift. They escorted heavy, treaded transports. Arouar had mobilised them from the space port as soon as Koorland had reported on the installation. The Fists Exemplar and the combined regiments of the Astra Militarum pursued the orks through the gap between the mountains. Thane called a halt at the top of the descent into the rift. Below, the vastness of the ork horde poured into the valley. Kilometres in the distance, flashes of tortured energy marked the nexus.

The orks were rushing for the vulnerable centre of their machine, the centre they must attack but not destroy. In their rush to bring down the intruders, they demolished their own defensive wall. Past that barrier, though, they were forced into more cautious manoeuvres. The super-heavy vehicles had slowed to a stop as they reached the first of the conduits. The battlefortresses moved slowly through the narrow avenues of the facility. The giant walkers, too wide to pass without uprooting the clusters of pipes or crushing the walls of power plants, halted at the edge. They turned

around to guard the approach into the rift, becoming the new line of defence. Beyond them, the smaller vehicles and infantry swarmed forward.

The entirety of the ork army had entered the Ascias Rift. The war hinged on a moment of enormous risk and opportunity.

‘They must be held,’ said Thane. ‘No reinforcements to the north wall. They must not retake the command centre, and they must not leave the canyon until Dominus Arouar has control of the gravity weapon.’

‘We are well positioned for an artillery strike,’ General Imren voxed.

Thane shared her eagerness for retaliation on a massive scale. ‘Not yet,’ he said. ‘We need the weapon operational. Damage must be contained. We will neutralise their Titans.’

‘Then we will deal with the rest.’

‘The battle will not be won on the floor of the rift,’ Thane told her. The mortals should labour under no illusions. The orks outnumbered and outgunned the regiments.

‘The undertaking is clear to me, Chapter Master.’

‘Then the Emperor guide your hand, general.’

‘And yours.’

Lucifer Blacks, Orion Watch, Jupiter Storm, Granite Myrmidons, Auroran Rifles, the battered and the bloody regiments of Terra stormed into the rift as if answering the first call to war. Battle horns sounded, challenging the orks to turn and face their pursuers, announcing the arrival of Imperial vengeance.

The Fists Exemplar tanks and assault squads took the lead, drawing the fire of the walkers to open the way for the regiments. The Rhinos carried the company. Thane rode in the upper hatch of his transport, watching for the moment to disembark. His target was the walker on the western side of the shattered wall. Its turrets and cannon arm fired, but their movement hesitated between a plethora of targets, the operators within the beast distracted by the strafing of Xiphon interceptors and the arcing flight of Thamarius’ assault squads. The shells hit. The ground exploded in flame one beat behind the roaring troop carriers.

The full strength of the Fists Exemplar drew that much closer to the colossal war machines.

‘*Now!*’ Thane voxed to the company. ‘*Now now now!*’

He leapt from the turret. The rear doors slammed open. The Fists

Exemplar burst from the carriers.

The walkers found their targets at close range. They fired.

Thane ran through a holocaust of flame.

Imren heard the world ending behind her. It had been ending all this long night. She had had enough. If the end had come for her and for the troops under her command, then it would come for the enemy too. To the rear was the cataclysm of super-heavy cannon fire. Before her was the inferno of the horde. She expected to drown in the green tide. But by the Throne, she would go under with honour intact.

Wind buffeted the canyon. The banners of the regiments and of the Imperium flapped. Their ragged state only made their pride the fiercer. They flew high, and they were saluted by the full-throated roar of armoured fury. Leman Russ battle cannons, Taurox autocannons, Chimera multi-lasers and heavy bolters blasted the enemy infantry to shreds. Trucks and battlewagons exploded before they could turn. Rather than a walking barrage, Imren had ordered targets over a wide range, as far as the tanks could fire with enough accuracy that they would not cause critical damage to the facility. Geysers of fire and shattered bodies erupted across the canyon-filling mob. Confusion and rage rippled out of the impacts.

Columns of infantry charged into the orks, stabbing with bayonets even as they burned with las. Thousands of men and women howled. Driven by repeated retreats, defeats and the festering humiliation of the Proletarian Crusade, they were starved for revenge. In their anger, they were as savage as the orks. No urging was needed from the commissars. Every trooper was on a personal vendetta.

In the foe's chaotic response, Imren saw contradictory orders. The facility was under attack from the north, the south and in the centre. The threats were everywhere, the priority targets unclear.

'Choose us, xenos filth!' Imren shouted at the burning night. 'We are your doom! We are the great danger to your machine!'

As if they heard her over her cannons and their snarls, the orks reversed course. The tidal wave came for the Astra Militarum. It boiled through the passages between conduits rising from the ground and the generators. It flowed around the columns of Imperial infantry. It rushed to all sides of the armour. Carried in the current, rocking as they ran over the slower

brutes, the battlewagons rumbled forward, their guns firing with greater abandon the closer they came.

Imren was yelling with her troops. Her throat was scraped raw. She could not hear herself over the ecstatic clamour of war. She could find no words for her rage. She gave herself over to the possession of fury. But her thoughts were clear. They were a prayer to the Emperor. As the vortex enveloped her, she thought, again and again, let this have meaning. Let this have meaning.

*Let us have meaning.*

‘No,’ said Alquist Arouar. Along the east edge of the Ascia Rift, skitarii and electro-priests paused in their tasks. ‘Physical connections must remain pending. Complete operations until that stage. Proceed no further until confirmation of the primarch’s success.’

He moved back from the cliff edge, tracing the web of cables running from the ork energy coil to the Mechanicus assembly. The control mechanism was large. It had taken four heavy transport vehicles to haul its components to this position, and three others had carried the means of conjunction. Kilometres of metre-thick cable spread out from the assembly, reaching out to four of the coils. Each of the ork structures was the height of a Warhound-class Titan. Each released enough excess energy to incinerate a division of infantry. The four Arouar was going to tap into were only a fraction of the total number. He extrapolated that their interconnection through the larger system would make them act in concert once he had control. Whether seizing four would be enough was the question to be tested.

He looked back at the coil, and at the network of coruscating light in the depths of the canyon. The moment was extraordinary. His multiplicity of sensors struggled to keep up with the wave of data. To be this close to the ork technology, to have the opportunity to put the theoretical work done on Mars during the war to work – to have access to the coveted machinery itself – was beyond price.

The flood of data had an undertow. In the terms of the flesh, it was temptation. It invited Arouar to submerge his consciousness in the study of the machine. If that was the final act of his being, and the data he processed made its way back to Mars, that would be a worthy form of

worship of the Ommissiah.

Princeps Tynora 7-Galliax moved into his field of view, and recalled him to the necessities of the present. Her heavily armoured form was more massive than Arouar's and more compact, its mechadendrites smaller and withdrawn within the armour's shell. Her form had been forged for war at the expense of almost all exploratory function.

She was the reminder. The Mechanicus was at war. The Fabricator General had been explicit: the orks must be defeated. Terra must be saved. Data collection was a secondary priority. Koorland was Lord Commander of the Imperium, and his orders were to be followed.

7-Galliax gazed over Arouar's shoulder at the assembled control machinery. 'What is our probability of error?' she asked.

'Considerable,' said Arouar. The precise calculation changed moment to moment as he observed and evaluated the behaviour of the installation. 'Our mimicry of the ork technology is approximate in its effects. In terms of power, greatly lacking. Interface between xenos work and our own is a fraught procedure. Contamination and failure are inherent risks.' He paused, looking over his shoulder to consider the progress of the work behind him. The assembly was complete. Its core was a based on a teleporter control, surrounded by giant capacitors and convertors. It had no power source of its own. It would use that of the weapon itself when connected, as long as there was no countervailing force still functioning.

'What is the most favourable evaluation?'

'A crude form of control. And a brief one.' Even that, though, would be an immense victory. The data collected from that action alone could be the greatest achievement of the war this far.

7-Galliax nodded. She returned to the edge of the cliff. Below, battle raged. Energy flares mixed with the flashes of cannon fire and detonations, and the burning streaks of las. Arouar's auditory receptors processed vast movement, analogous to clashing waves. The pulsations from the control nexus intensified. They became angry, their rhythm irregular. Deep, geologic vibrations travelled up from the centre of the rift. Puffs of dust rose from the ground. The edge of the cliff crumbled. The great coil trembled, its crackling bursts lashing out like the strike of a serpent.

'Stand by,' Arouar commanded his forces. 'The moment of action or of defeat approaches.' He advanced towards the core of his control assembly.

It was inert but filled with gigantic potential. He settled into the throne, mehadendrites locking into place along its back and arms, fusing him with the machine. He observed the violent aurora of the canyon. He waited for its convulsions to reveal triumph or disaster.

Up. Down. Up. Down. The gravity fist turning Vulkan into the clapper of a bell, the impacts more and more ferocious. The ork engineer showing no care for the integrity of the structure. The gigantic force turned to the single task of destroying one warrior.

This is still not enough, he thought.

The enemy fears you.

The thought emerged from his deepest core. Beneath the battering pain, the constriction, and the confusion of the senses, was the immovable, the implacable, and the calm. Vulkan pulled his consciousness down into his absolute centre. There he had the patience and the resolution of mountains. He shut out damage and suffering. In the stony dark of that calm, he regained the coherence of his thoughts.

*The enemy fears you.*

*You are a threat.*

*The assault grows more desperate.*

*Desperation is weakness.*

*Strike it.*

Not the clapper of a bell, then. He was the hammer against the anvil. His core turned molten. The calm of the mountain became the anger of the volcano.

*Erupt.*

His consciousness exploded back into the full awareness of his body, and then transcended it. He observed his arc against the wall, and saw not the wound inflicted but the action he must take. And when the engineer hurled him to the floor again, he moved. He did not struggle against gravity. He acted in concert with it. He turned it into his own weapon. He punched forward with his left hand, hitting the floor, and drove his arm deep into the stone. He took root. He held Caldera. It held him back.

When gravity reversed, he remained in place.

The agony was a revelation. Forces sought to rip his body apart. He defied them. The ork had ceased to laugh, and now it froze. It stared at

him, hands hovering uncertainly over its controls.

Tempered by the pain, guided by magmatic anger, Vulkan raised Doomtremor. The hammer's wrath lit up the interior of the nexus with the blaze of a sun. Thunderhead, Dawnbringer, weapons long lost, were present to his spirit in that which he now held aloft. Their terrible strength demanded Vulkan rise. And with the reversed gravity, but against its current, he threw the hammer.

Its flight was true. A comet roared across the space between Vulkan and the pillar. It struck the platform, the impact released the energy of the throw, of the hammer, and of gravity itself. The explosion swallowed the top half of the pillar. The gravitic fist released him. He stood, and marched through a vortex of howling, chaotic lightning to retrieve Doomtremor.

The pillar ended in a jagged stump. The control mechanism was gone, vaporised along with its master. Around Vulkan, surviving orks ran in panic as their great mechanism lost all direction. The ground heaved and cracked.

Vulkan moved through a gathering storm. He picked up his hammer, braced his stance, and waited, fighting the instinct to destroy the abomination around him. If it did not find a new master within the next few moments, the storm would rip the planet open.

The shaking built.

Cracks became chasms.

The world groaned.

In the centre of the rift, the energy discharges were maddened. Arouar's throne vibrated, presaging worse tremors to come.

'Proceed,' the dominus commanded.

The connections were made.

He screamed. His larynx was no longer capable of such a sound. His vocalisations had long been purged of any trace of emotion. Yet he screamed, emitting a wailing stream of binaric. His senses lit up with electric fire.

He became a god maddened by the pain of his own power.

Duty to the Ommissiah was his lodestone. His one focus was the coordinates of the ork attack moon.

In an act of prayer, he flexed his power.

And he lifted a mountain.

‘Admiral.’

The voice was distant. Rodolph could barely hear it. His body was growing cold and numb. He was dying along with his ship. He had to keep his attention on the oculus, on the sight of the moon. If his mind drifted, if his will failed, all would be lost.

‘Admiral.’

The voice was insistent. Then a hand shook his shoulder. The movement shot pain through his abdomen. He winced and looked away from the oculus.

Groth was beside him. The bridge was filled with smoke, but his crew was still on station. The *Finality* was still fighting. It was still approaching the moon.

‘What is it, captain?’ he managed.

‘Look, sir.’ She pointed to the auspex screen on his right.

Rodolph looked. The sensor array had picked up another mass rising from the planet towards the moon. Rodolph blinked. The mass was coming far too fast.

He grinned.

The mass became visible through the oculus a few moments later. It had risen with such velocity it was heated to red by its passage through the atmosphere. It spun end-over-end, thousands of metres long, trillions of tonnes of rock, a missile hurled at the exposed heart of the ork base. Rodolph watched it disappear into the uncompleted face of the assault moon.

It was small by comparison to the target, but so was a bullet fired into the body of a man. In the next instant, a fireball bloomed from the interior of the moon. It expanded far beyond the crescent edge, spreading until it was almost as wide as the moon. It was a sudden tumour, its uncontrollable growth killing the host. Fissures appeared across the partial globe. Fire leaked out of them. The moon was in agony.

‘Finish it,’ Rodolph said. ‘In the Emperor’s name, finish it.’

Much of the ork fleet had broken away from the *Finality* and formed a blockade around the open face. It was vaporised in the explosion. The path was clear for the battleship to complete its run and launch its full

armament into the glowing interior.

Rodolph's head cleared still further. He felt strength return to his body with the flush of victory.

But not all the orks had left. Those who remained kept on the attack. When the torpedoes slammed into the stern, Rodolph knew the worst before Groth told him. He felt the blow like a knife between the ribs.

'The warp drive,' he said.

'Yes,' Groth answered. 'Breached.'

'How long?'

She spoke into the ship's vox. Rodolph was surprised there were any survivors left in the enginarium to answer her.

Groth looked at the oculus, then back at Rodolph. 'Not long,' she said. 'But long enough.'

Rodolph nodded. They understood each other. 'Better than any ordnance,' he said.

'A definitive blow. A fine victory, admiral. Well fought.'

'And you, captain. And you.'

'Signal the Mechanicus vessels,' Groth called. 'They should rejoin the *Alcazar Remembered*. Helmsman,' Groth called. 'Take us in. For the Emperor!'

The crew echoed her. '*For the Emperor!*'

All batteries firing their last, marking the void with the purging light of the Imperial Navy's power, the *Finality* plunged through the remaining ork vessels, completing its run, fulfilling its destiny. Rodolph watched the open face of the moon reveal itself. He saw a honeycomb of madness, construction on a gargantuan scale burning, shattered, pulsing with mortal fire. The *Finality* entered the maw of the wounded giant, warp reactors about to go critical. It travelled through an immensity of caves natural and artificial, of hangar bays for entire armadas, bearing with it a sun about to be born.

Rodolph gazed at what was about to be destroyed. The price he had paid for this vision seemed very little.

When the end came, in furious light, he was ecstatic.

He had taken one action. He had struck one blow. The power was building, raging, a beast about to slip its tether. Arouar's grip on his omnipotence

slipped. One more move, and then he must disengage. One more move, the one to bring an end to the power. The one Koorland had ordered him to make regardless of the situation in the canyon.

Arouar had no knowledge of the war below now. He had no knowledge of anything except the blinding absolute. So he took the action.

*The Machine is all. Death to the blasphemy of the xenos machine.*

Vulkan felt the change in the tremors. He felt how deep they went. He knew what was coming.

No more waiting, then. Culmination was at hand.

Koorland ducked beneath the ork dreadnought's swing. The thing's forearm was as long as he was tall, and it ended in a vice of revving killsaws. Another arm came in lower on the same side. Koorland stepped in closer, avoiding the saws but not the blow itself. It knocked him to the right, into the grasp of the two right arms. The claws seized him. The saws dug into his armour. He maglocked his bolter and with his free hand took a krak grenade from his belt, throwing it at the dreadnought's viewing slit. The explosive attached itself to the metal and went off, damaging the ork's shell.

It did not eat all the way through the armour, but the flash of its detonation stunned the greenskin wired into the mechanism. It flinched, and so did its mechanical limbs. Their grip loosened. Koorland pulled himself free. The gouges in his left flank went through his armour, all the way down to the bone.

He jumped forward before the dreadnought could react, grabbing the top of the huge head, then hauled himself up, and plunged his chainsword through the viewing slit. The blade vibrated as it cut through the body inside. Animal screams of pain turned into gurgles. Blood sprayed out of the slit, drenching Koorland's chestplate. The war machine's arms dropped. It stumbled forward, then stopped, inert.

Koorland dropped to the ground, grabbed his bolter and sprayed shells in a long burst, felling the greenskins that closed with him. To his right, another ork dreadnought had pinned Eternity to the ground. Its shoulder-mounted guns pummelled the veteran. The killsaws dug into him. Daylight was fighting to reach him, but the third dreadnought launched two rockets

at him. The blasts took out the orks surrounding him and sent him flying. Absolution led three other battle-brothers against the dreadnought. Their relentless bolter fire and washes of flamer held it at bay.

But Eternity was dying.

Koorland ran, chainsword forward, bolt-shells scything his path toward Eternity. As he did, the earth tremors become violent. He managed to keep his feet, but many of the orks were knocked down as the ground bucked, an animal convulsing in pain. Koorland moved in awkward leaps, trusting the air instead of the surface, landing with hard stamps to keep his balance, putting more faith in luck than in the earth to be where he expected.

He closed with the dreadnought. Its mass was so great, its centre of gravity so low, that it was remaining stable through the tremors. It held Eternity fast with two of its arms and was cutting deep with the other two. Eternity's rune was flickering between amber and red in Koorland's retinal lens. 'Brother!' Koorland called to him.

'Finish it fast!' Eternity shouted, his voice tight with struggle and agony.

A crevasse burst open to Koorland's left. The earth rose and fell in waves. Echoes of Ardamantua pursued him. The land in chaotic movement, the enemy overwhelming, the death of brothers looming.

But this was not Ardamantua. This was Caldera. And the orks were roaring in dismay as the planet turned against them. The quakes were not a mystery and the prologue to defeat by a power beyond his ability to grasp. The tremors were the work of the Imperium. They were the sign of victory.

And Koorland flew over the land, propelled by the furious energy of vengeance.

His shells struck the armour of the dreadnought. Not hard enough to punch through, but hard enough to draw the pilot's attention. It held Eternity with its left limbs and turned to meet Koorland's charge, guns blazing. Koorland ran into the fire. He exchanged his chainsword for a melta bomb, and ran through the snarling embrace of the arms, colliding with the dreadnought. It was like running into a tank, though his mass and momentum were enough to rock the monster back a step. He slapped the melta bomb against the dreadnought's flank, then he threw himself back and over Eternity's prone figure, shielding him.

The shaped charge ate through the ork monster. It melted iron and conduits and the flesh inside. At this proximity, the heat flash seared off

the top layers of Koorland's armour. His power pack fought to compensate, read-outs redlining in his lenses. The temperature inside his armour was enough to roast flesh. The dreadnought's ammunition cooked off, and the war beast blew apart. Shrapnel embedded itself in Koorland's back and arms. He rose, servo-motors catching and whining. His armour was heavy and sluggish. He fought to keep moving.

The tremors were still growing in intensity. There was not much time.

Eternity had lost his left leg below the knee. Koorland helped him stand. The wounded Space Marine took his chainaxe from his back and used the shaft as a cane, while Koorland held his shoulder. The dreadnought's explosion had cleared some space for them.

'Time to go, I think,' Eternity rasped.

'Yes.' Across the command network, Koorland sent the order. 'To all Imperial forces, the enemy's defeat is at hand. Withdraw from the rift. But keep the orks contained.' Switching to the squad channels, he said, 'To the tunnels, brothers. To the tunnels.'

The brothers of the Last Wall fought their way back through the cauldron of orks, staggering up the slope. The land was a sea in storm. Chunks of the cliffs were falling onto the battlefield.

Koorland found he had to put his faith in the orks. He had to hope they had built their wall strong enough to withstand the storm.

'Take the ground from under them!' Thane ordered.

The armour of the ork walkers had withstood the fire of the Predators and the missiles of the gunships. The huge skirts of the behemoths were smoking and cratered, but so dense they still had not collapsed to expose the interior. The orks had destroyed two of the Fists Exemplar tanks. The Imperial armour was faster and more manoeuvrable than the greenskin machines, and they stayed close to the enemy, forcing the orks to risk their own destruction in the firing of the huge guns. But when the orks moved back, all it took was a single step, a lucky swing of the arm, and the tanks were exposed.

The earthquakes had begun. They were building. Remaining upright was difficult. Thane would make it even more so for the walkers.

Most of the greenskin infantry was held further into the valley, in the battle with Imren's regiments. The Fists Exemplar destroyed the foot

soldiers who had made it this far. Thane sent half the company downslope to hold back the rest. But the walkers were the problem. They needed to be stopped.

And as the tremors presaged great events to come, a barrier was needed.

The tanks lowered their guns. They blasted the land at the walkers' feet. The shells dug deep depressions in the already wounded land. New fissures opened, joined, and spread in webs.

The ground heaved. The ground plunged.

And Koorland's order came.

'Acknowledged,' Thane said.

He waited to hear the same from Imren. There was only silence from the general.

The walkers' steps slowed, then stopped. They stood their ground, immensity holding them in place, while their gigantic arm turrets moved with jerking urgency, their shots coming faster but more erratic.

'Chapter Master,' Aloysian called on the feed. He and the rest of Thane's squad were between the two walkers. The Techmarine pointed to the western monster. A third of the way up the hull, a shell impact had destroyed a gun emplacement and peeled back the piston-raised shutters that protected it.

'I see it.' The actual opening was small, the angle unpromising, but it was an opportunity. He eyed the overlapping shields. Their edges would serve. 'With me, Brother Aloysian.'

They climbed. The rest of the squad provided covering fire as the other shutters opened and the orks rained shots down on the intruders.

Aloysian took the lead, climbing faster with his servo-arms. He and Thane took shots, but there was no evasion to take. It was all Thane could do to hold on to the ledges as the iron wall he climbed rocked and swayed, the operators of the walker struggling to compensate for the upheavals of the tremors.

Higher. Gravity and violent motion tried to throw them to the ground. Slugs slammed into their armour, striking at their gauntlets. Higher. The shattered gun came with reach. Smoke poured from the rent.

With less than two metres to go, a pair of orks appeared in the gap. They turned their shotguns on Thane and Aloysian. The Techmarine responded with his plasma cutter, firing the jet into the brutish faces, burning them

off their skulls. The greenskins fell back, and Aloysian climbed in after them. Thane followed.

There was no time for strategy. Koorland's warning was almost a minute in the past. Thane charged through the narrow passageway leading from the wrecked gun. It led to a network of catwalks and compartments surrounding a shaft where immense pistons and gears formed the mobile skeleton of the walker's leg. While Aloysian cut cables and breached conduits, Thane hurled krak grenades into the shaft above and below their position. He exhausted his supply and sprayed bursts of shells in all directions. Smaller greenskins panicked. Larger ones died trying to attack. Mass-reactive shells blew apart the supports on the catwalks and they fell into the shaft, tangling gears.

The grenades went off. The damage spread. The machine shook within and without.

The floor tilted.

'Out,' said Thane.

The raid had taken thirty seconds.

They ran back to the gun emplacement. They climbed out of the gap, the slope of the walker's skirt now near vertical. The walker was listing, one leg paralysed, its motion becoming erratic. The behemoth was unstable, and it was still firing. Thane and Aloysian dropped down its side, slowing their fall with quick grabs at ledges for as long as they could, then leaping the last several metres.

They landed on ground whose movement was as violent as the walker's.

'Pull back,' Thane ordered. 'Out of the rift. Suppressive fire on any enemy who follow.' He tried to raise Imren, and this time she answered. 'General,' he said. 'There is no more time.'

'I agree, Chapter Master.' She sounded injured. 'There is no time. We will hold the enemy. Preserve our memory on Terra.'

Thane grimaced at the scale of the sacrifice. 'It will be celebrated,' he said.

'Thank you.' She signed off.

The Predators had ceased firing. They had shattered the land, and the walkers could not move forward without stepping into depressions that would overbalance them. The tanks now moved upslope. The pass between the volcanoes seemed desperately narrow from Thane's position. The

peaks thundered, and the clouds around them turned crimson. The eruptions had begun.

The Fists Exemplar charged between the walkers. The ork machines fired their cannons, and fired again, but the tremors were too powerful. The shells went wild, striking cliffs and mountainsides. The western walker lurched. Internal blasts beat against its interior. Thane and Aloysian stood between the two beasts until the rest of the company had passed through, then they followed. The wounded walker tried to walk. The tremors, broken land and the damage made the error a fatal one.

The walker began to fall towards its mate.

Titanic metal walls closed together over Thane's head. A war mountain fell upon another. The monsters collided. Their limbs entangled. With grinding blasts aloft, Titan fused with Titan.

Thane and Aloysian passed from beneath their shadow, racing over the bucking, groaning earth for the waiting Rhino. The transport ground forward as the hatch slammed shut. Thane climbed through the roof turret to look back. He saw the final act of desperation, anger and madness. He saw the great cannons fire again.

The guns had no valid targets. They were aimed downward and too close to each other. The walker to the west blew up the lower reaches of the other's armour. The eastern one created a new crater before both colossi. It turned into a widening chasm. The walkers fell forward, lodging in the gap, riven by blasts. The guns, their barrels now aiming beneath the surface, boomed again, but this time Thane knew he was hearing the start of a chain reaction, the weaponry of the monsters consuming itself in uncontrolled detonations. The walkers turned into metal volcanoes, a blazing wall of ruin across the southern access to the Ascia Rift, containing orks and humans alike inside the doomed installation.

The Thunderhawks kept pace with the convoy of Predators and Rhinos overhead. Their guns were silent. Their role now was to rescue battle-brothers from any vehicles that fell into the multiplying fissures.

The tremors shook the Rhino. Thane held tight to the turret to avoid being thrown free. On either side, the mountains raged. Rockslides roared down the faces. Lava followed, blood drawn from the night. Behind, in the pass, he watched the ork structures waver and fall, collapsing in a growing sea of flame.

And then came the immense crack of terminal rending. It was a sharp retort, but so deep and vast it drowned all other sound of war and destruction. It was the sound of the Ascia Rift opening wide its maw.

A terrible dawn broke, incandescent red, the sun rising from the centre of the canyon.

The rift parted. The great wound began in the centre. Metres wide, then tens of metres, then hundreds. It swallowed the ruins of the command nexus. It stretched its reach, longer and longer, expanding to half the length of the canyon. From it came the lava in a tide, a flood, a wall. A sea of molten rock rose to fill the rift.

It rose to swallow armies.

Imren saw it, and she smiled. She stood on her Chimera, bleeding out from a gut shot. Nissen was dead, burned when an ork rocket took out the treads and front of the hull. She was dying, but she was standing, and she was firing her plasma pistol at the enemy, and she had lived to see the victory. And so she smiled.

The victory was staggering to behold. She and her troops would become part of a legend, and that was glorious. Her soul was staggered by the sight. A lava wall thirty metres high swept toward her, and the sight was greater in her perception than the devouring heat that came before it. The orks in their tens of thousands, their tanks and their transports, their weapons and all their works disappeared in the wall. They were silhouettes of defeat, of fleeing despair, and then they were gone.

The wave was almost upon her. It took her troops. The heat set her hair alight. The light of the world's anger blinded her. And there was pain. Inconceivable pain.

But greater than everything was the victory. Her troops celebrated as they died, and her final thoughts were of exultation.

*A worthy end.*

*Honour is restored.*

Koorland brought up the rear in the tunnel. He supported Eternity. He fired, killing the fleeing orks, denying them the last of a faint hope. The sides of the tunnel glowed with the heat. The joints of Koorland's armour kept locking. He was dragging it almost as much as he was Eternity. But

behind came the searing light of Caldera's vengeance, spurring him on.

The wall was endless. The heat was swift and merciless. The lava flowed up the slope, devouring the horde, and then Koorland turned away. There was nothing but the killing brilliance behind him.

He staggered into the night, seconds ahead of the deluge. The *Honour's Spear* was on the ground, rear hatch down, engines rumbling and eager for flight.

'A good night's work,' Eternity slurred, barely conscious.

'A great dawn,' Koorland answered. He lurched up the ramp with his burden and collapsed onto a bench with his brother. The hatch closed and the Thunderhawk leapt for the skies.

Koorland looked through the viewing block. Lava shot out of the tunnel, a glowing finger emerging from the wall. Moments later the barrier failed. It had been strong enough to keep its builders trapped inside. Now it melted in the embrace of the lava flow. The mountainous landscape filled with incinerating light.

'And the primarch?' Eternity asked. 'What of Vulkan?'

'I have faith,' Koorland answered.

They had returned to Torrens, as the Protector of Caldera had commanded. There was little of the mining settlement that remained. It was a location with a name, and some ruins, in which could be traced the fractured memories of a wall, of habitations, an echo of streets. But Lord Vulkan had commanded that they return, and so they had. The mere handful who had survived.

And now, standing where their rampart had been, they looked north, and saw the wrathful birth of day.

The glare of the lava flow spilled out from between the silhouettes of the twin volcanoes.

'Will it reach this far?' Karla asked.

The question had been on Becker's lips too. He didn't know.

'If it does,' said a voice deep as stone, 'you will depart ahead of it, and begin anew. You know this danger. To be tempered on its anvil is your blessing as Calderans.'

Mesmerised by the flood, they had not seen Vulkan approach. He was before them now, a giant in the growing light.

‘I once brought a deluge of flame to this planet,’ he said. ‘It was a necessary destruction, and from the ashes of what had been before, Caldera was born. I then made a covenant with this world. I made no promise that I would not bring a burning flood again, but I swore to fight for Caldera.’ He raised his arm, and pointed with his hammer towards the lava. ‘Thus have I kept my oath. So will I ever.’ He gazed down on the people of Torrens. His eyes were as fierce as the lava flow, Becker thought. But they were also kind. ‘You have made me proud,’ Vulkan said. ‘You have fought well. Keep faith with Caldera as I do.’

‘We shall,’ Becker said.

‘We swear it,’ said Karla.

‘*We swear it!*’ One voice. All the voices.

Vulkan nodded. ‘Then I am satisfied.’

# EPILOGUE

## Terra – The Imperial Palace

The Monitus was a large, semi-circular hall at the top of the Stilicho Tower. Its huge, arcing balcony looked out towards the dome of the Great Chamber. Standing sentry on massive plinths every five metres along the balcony were monolithic, granite statues representing each of the original Loyalist Legions of the Space Marines. Each plinth held two statues, one facing towards the Great Chamber, the other casting a cold gaze down to the floor of the hall. The Monitus was the promise and reminder of vigilance. It was an unforgiving space.

The High Lords rarely set foot in it.

Valefor of the Blood Angels, Macrinus of the Ultramarines, Asger of the Space Wolves and Adnachiell of the Dark Angels were already there when Koorland arrived. The statues were three times larger than life, but the presence of the living Adeptus Astartes filled the hall. If the four commanders had been speaking before, they were silent now, and standing with some distance between them. Their faces were cold when they saw Koorland, and he knew the struggle he would have faced had he attempted to lead the expedition to Ullanor.

Koorland walked to the centre of the Monitus. ‘Brothers,’ he said. ‘I thank you for answering Terra’s call.’ Then he waited.

Behind came heavy footsteps. Vulkan entered the chamber.

The change came over the faces of the other Space Marines. Koorland saw in them the disbelieving awe he had experienced on Caldera. As one, they dropped to a knee and bowed their heads before the primarch.

‘Rise, brothers,’ Vulkan said. He strode between them to the edge of the

balcony. He looked at the Great Chamber. He was silent for a full minute. Then, his voice redolent with judgement, he said, 'I will meet the High Lords here.'

'This is a coup,' Tobris Ekharth complained.

Vangorich listened to the Master of the Administratum's whine as the Council made its way up the long spiral staircase leading to the Monitus. No one else spoke. They let Ekharth bluster.

'Koorland ousts Lord Udo,' Ekharth continued. 'He reforms a coherent Legion. He summons reinforcements to Terra. Then a figurehead. Then we are summoned to attend on the Astartes as though we were serfs. The primarch will not even deign to set foot in the Grand Chamber. And he makes us wait a full day before seeing us. *A day!* Don't you see the pattern? Don't you see what is happening? Koorland has returned a conqueror, and we are the conquered.'

Vangorich thought the man was on the verge of sobbing. He was desperate for an ally, for even one other High Lord to confirm his thinking. At the top of the stairs, in the antechamber to the Monitus, Ekharth jerked his head back and forth like a bird, pleading with his eyes. He found silence. He paled.

*You're more and less alone than you think, Vangorich was tempted to tell him. No one is contradicting you. They agree with you. But they won't take the risk of saying so.*

They entered the Monitus. When he saw the towering figure who awaited them, Vangorich had to stifle a gasp of awe and hope.

The silence of the rest of the Council took on a different cast. They were struck dumb. And they were terrified.

Vulkan was flanked by Koorland and the representatives of the four Chapters. The primarch had his arms folded. His eyes were stony.

Far below, in the streets and the squares and the chapels of the Imperial Palace, the people were celebrating the triumph of Caldera. The first true victory of the war. The first real sign of hope. But the sounds of rejoicing did not reach this high. There was only more and more and more silence. And something worse: judgement.

Ecclesiarch Mesring cleared his throat. He tried to speak. 'Lord Vulkan,' he croaked, 'we honour your—'

‘I have spoken with Chapter Master Koorland,’ the primarch said. Mesring froze, jaw hanging open.

‘I have spent a day and a night in contemplation of the words and deeds of the High Lords,’ Vulkan continued. ‘You should give thanks for the orks and for the threat they represent.’ He spoke calmly, and with infinite disgust. ‘If not for the need for unity, I would kill you all myself.’

*Strike, Vangorich wanted to say. Strike now. Purge the rot and make something new. That is something a legend can do.*

He said nothing.

Vulkan spoke again. ‘We make ready for Ullanor. You will do your duty in the preparations.’

And Vangorich sighed. The moment had passed. The High Lords were terrified, but they were calculating again. Each faction had tried to use Koorland to its ends. Now an even greater power had arrived, and the game resumed.

Even with the stakes higher than ever, the game went on. Petty beasts snapped at each other.

While on Ullanor, the Great Beast awaited.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**David Annandale** is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *The Damnation of Pythos*. He also writes the Yarrick series, consisting of the novella *Chains of Golgotha* and the novels *Imperial Creed* and *The Pyres of Armageddon*. For Space Marine Battles he has written *The Death of Antagonis* and *Overfiend*. He is a prolific writer of short fiction, including the novella *Mephiston: Lord of Death* and numerous short stories set in The Horus Heresy and Warhammer 40,000 universes. He has also written several short stories set in the Age of Sigmar. David lectures at a Canadian university, on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games.

An extract from [Vulkan Lives](#).



‘Vulkan lives.’

Two words. Two grating words. They closed around me like a rusty trap, snaring me with their savage teeth. So many dead... No, slain. And yet...

*Vulkan.*

*Lives.*

I felt each one reverberate inside my skull like a triphammer striking a tuning fork, pressing at my temples, every syllable pulsing headache-red. They were little more than a mocking whisper, these two simple words, mocking me because I survived when I should have died. Because I lived, they did not.

Surprise, awe, or perhaps it was the simple desire not to be heard that made the speaker craft his words so quietly. In any case, the voice that gave utterance to them was confident and full of undeniable charisma.

I knew its cadence, its timbre, as familiarly as I knew my own. I recognised the voice of my gaoler. And I, too, rasped as I declared it to him.

‘Horus...’

For all my brother’s obvious and demonstrative puissance, even in his voice, I could barely speak. It was as if I’d been buried for a long time and my throat was hoarse from swallowing too much dirt. I had yet to open my eyes, for the lids were leaden and stung as if they’d been washed out with neat promethium.

Promethium.

The word brought back a sense memory, the image of a battlefield swathed in smog and redolent of death. Blood saturated the air. It soaked the black sand underfoot. Smoke clung to banners edged in fire. In

fragments, I recalled a battle unlike any other that I or my Legion had ever fought. Such vast forces, such strength of arms, almost elemental in their fury. Brothers killed brothers, a death toll in the tens of thousands. Maybe more.

I saw Ferrus die, even though I wasn't present at his murder, but in my mind I saw it. We had a bond, he and I, forged in more than fraternal blood. We were too alike not to.

This was Isstvan V that I saw. A black, benighted world swarmed by a sea of legionaries bent on mutual destruction. Battle tanks by the hundreds, Titans roaming the horizon in murderous packs, drop-ships flooding the sky and choking it with their death-smoke and their engine fumes.

Chaos. Utter, unimaginable chaos.

That word had a different meaning now.

Further snatches of the massacre returned to me. I saw a hillside, a company of battle tanks at the summit. Their cannons were aimed low, firing off ordnance into our ranks and punishing us against the anvil.

Armour cracked. Fire rained. Bodies broke.

I charged with the Pyre Guard, but they soon lost pace with me as my anger overtook my capacity for reason. I hit the tanks on my own at first, like a hammer. With my hands I tore into the line of armour, battered it, roaring my defiance at a sky drenched crimson.

As my sons caught up to my wrath, light and fire arrived in the wake of my assault. It tore open the sky in a great strip of blinding magnesium white. Those nearby shut their eyes to it, but I saw the missiles hit. I watched the detonation and beheld the fire as it spread across the world like a boiling ocean.

Then there was darkness... for a time, until I remembered waking, but dazed. My war-plate was burned. I had been thrown from the battle. Alone, I staggered to my feet and saw a fallen son.

It was Nemetor.

Like an infant I cradled him, raising *Dawnbringer* aloft and crying out my anguish for all the good it would do. Because no matter how much you wish for it, the dead do not come back. Not really. And if they do, if by some fell craft you can restore them, they are forever changed. Revenants. Only a god can bring back the dead and return them to the living, and we had all been told that gods did not exist. I would come to understand the

great folly and undeniable truth of that in the time that followed.

My enemies reached me in a flood, stabbing with knives and bludgeoning with clubs. Some were midnight-clad, others wrapped in iron. I killed almost three score before they took Nemetor from my arms. And as I knelt there, bruised and bleeding, a shadow fell across me.

I asked, *'Why, brother?'*

And these next words were freshest in my memory, because of what Curze said as he loomed over me.

*'Because you're the one who's here.'*

It wasn't the answer I was expecting. My question had a much wider meaning than what Curze took it to be. Perhaps there was no answer, for isn't it inevitable that one day a son will rebel against his father and desire to succeed him, even if that succession meant committing patricide?

Though my eyes were gummed with blood, my helmet gone, I swore I saw Curze smiling as he looked down on me as at one of his slaves. The bastard. Even now, I believe he found it amusing. All the horror, the dirty shame of treachery and how it stuck to all of our skins. We primarchs, we who were supposed to be the best of all men, turned out to be the very worst.

Konrad had always enjoyed irony like that. It brought us all down to his level.

*'You are full of surprises.'*

At first I thought it was Curze again – my sense of time and space was colliding but not connecting, making it hard to focus properly – but he never said that to me at Istvan; he never said anything else after that moment.

No, it was Horus speaking. That cultured tonality, that deep basso which had made this treachery possible. Only he could have done it. I just didn't know why. Not yet.

I opened my eyes at last and saw before me the patrician countenance of a once noble man. Some would call him a demigod, I suppose. Perhaps we all were in our different ways, but then gods were supposed to be superstition honoured by lesser, credulous men.

And yet here we all were. Giants, warrior-kings, superhuman in every aspect. One of us even had wings; beautiful, white, angelic wings. Looking back now, I cannot fathom why no one looked at Sanguinius and wondered

if he were really a god.

‘Lupercal,’ I began, but Horus cut me off with a mirthless laugh.

‘Oh, Vulkan, you really were badly beaten.’

He was armoured in black, a suit I had only seen him wearing once before and which bore no resemblance to either the Luna Wolves of his origin, or the Sons of Horus that he led afterwards. As much as he wore it, the black also bled off him in waves like it wasn’t armour at all but some dark anima enclosing him. I had felt it before, caught some inkling of the man he was becoming, but to my shame did nothing to prevent it. An eye glowered in the midriff, blazing and orange like Nocturne’s sun but without the honest heat of natural fire.

He gripped my chin with a taloned power fist, and I felt the claws pinch.

‘What do you want with me? To kill me, like you killed my sons? Where is this place you have me imprisoned?’

As my eyes adjusted, healing through the gifts my exceptional father gave me, I saw only darkness. It reminded me of the shadow Curze cast over me when I was at his mercy on the plains of Isstvan.

‘You are right about one thing,’ Horus said, his voice changing as I grew more lucid, becoming gradually sharper and more rigid, ‘you *are* a prisoner. A very dangerous one, I think. As to my purpose,’ he laughed again, ‘I honestly don’t know yet.’

I blinked, once, twice, and the face before me transformed into another, one I could scarcely believe.

‘Roboute?’

My brother, the primarch of the XIII Legion Ultramarines, had drawn a gladius. It looked ceremonial, never blooded.

‘Is that who you see?’ Guilliman asked, eyes narrowing before he slid the blade into my bare flesh.

Only then did I realise that I was unarmoured, and sense the fetters around my wrists, ankles and neck. The gladius bit deep, burning at first but then growing colder around the wound. It was sunk into my chest, all the way to the hilt.

My eyes widened. ‘What... what... is this?’

Breath knifed through my lungs, bubbling up through the blood rising in my throat, making me gurgle.

He laughed. ‘It’s a sword, Vulkan.’

I gritted my teeth, anger clamping my mouth shut.

His voice changed again as Guilliman leaned in close and I could no longer see his face, but felt his charnel breath upon my cheek.

‘Oh, I think I am going to like this, brother. You definitely won’t, but I will.’

He hissed as if savouring the thought of whatever tortures he was already concocting, and it put me in mind of soft, chiropteran wings. My jaw hardened as I discovered the true identity of my tormentor, his name escaping through my clenched teeth like a curse.

‘Curze.’

### *Persona non grata...*

A figure armoured in crimson stumbled into the chamber as if through a cut in a veil, a literal knife-thrust that parted realities and allowed him to escape into blessed darkness.

Valdrek Elias had been waiting in the sanctum, waiting for days for his master’s return. It was foreseen, his humbling at the Warmaster’s hands. It was known that Horus would challenge the Pantheon and it was known that his own father would forsake him. A martyr’s cause was not for him, however. He was destined for greater and everlasting glory.

So it had been told to Elias, and so he had waited.

Now he cradled a wretched figure in his arms, torn and broken, savaged by the very warriors who were meant to be his allies.

‘Blessed master, you are injured...’ Elias’s voice trembled, in fear, in shame, in anger. There was blood all over the floor. Rivulets of dark red ran into sigils marked upon the iron tiles, casting off an eldritch glow as each engraving was filled with blood.

Elias muttered to keep the lambent glow from growing into something he could not control. He doubted his master would be of any use at that moment. The chamber was a holy sanctum; blood should not be spilled there idly.

Head bowed, facing the floor, his master was shaking and mewling in pain. No... it wasn’t pain.

It was laughter.

Elias turned him over and saw the ruin of Erebus’s face, white eyes

staring from a skull wrapped in blood-soaked meat. His red-rimed teeth chattered in a lipless mouth, clacking together in a rictus grin before parting as he breathed.

Elias looked at him aghast. ‘What has been done to you?’

Erebus tried and failed to answer, spitting up a gobbet of crimson.

Disciple lifted master, carried him in both arms despite the weight of his war-plate, holding his partly insensate form across his body.

Parting with a blast of escaping pressure and the whirr of concealed servos, the sanctum doors opened into a corridor. The apothecarion was close.

‘A lesson...’ Erebus croaked finally, gurgling his words through blood.

Elias paused. Blood was dripping with a steady *plinking* rhythm as it struck the deck plates underfoot. He leaned in, the stink of copper growing more intense as he closed. ‘Yes?’

‘A lesson... for you.’

Erebus was delirious, and barely conscious. Whatever had been done to him had almost killed him. *Whoever* had done it had almost killed him.

‘Speak it, master,’ Elias whispered with all the fervour and devotion of a fanatic.

Erebus might have lost favour in some quarters, with his father certainly, but he still had supporters. They were few, but they were also ardent. The Dark Apostle’s voice shrank to a whisper. Even for one with Elias’s enhanced hearing, words were difficult to discern.

‘*Sharpen ours, blunt theirs...*’

‘Master? I don’t know what you are saying. Tell me, what must I do?’

With a strength belied by his frail condition, Erebus seized Elias by the throat. His eyes, those ever-staring lidless orbs of pure hate, glared. It was like he was peering into Elias’s tainted soul, searching it for any vestige of falsehood.

‘The weapons...’ he gasped, louder, angry. He laughed again, as if this were a truth he had only just realised, before spitting up more blood.

Elias’s gaze went to the athame clutched in his master’s claw-like hand. It was only because the fingers were bionic that he still held the ritual knife at all.

‘Weapons?’ Elias asked.

‘We can win the war. They are all... that matters.’ He sagged, the Dark

Apostle's passionate fire finally usurped by his injuries. 'Must have them or deny them to our...' Erebus trailed off, falling into unconsciousness.

Elias was without compass. He didn't know what to do, but trusted in the divine will of the Pantheon to guide him. Quickly, he took Erebus to the apothecarion and as soon as the Dark Apostle was on the slab and in the tender care of his surgeons, Elias opened a vox-channel.

'Narek.'

The voice that answered was harsh and grating.

'*Brother.*'

Elias knew that the athame was powerful. He was not some novice unschooled in the art of the warp. He knew full well what it could do. He possessed his own, a mere simulacrum of the one in Erebus's clutches, as did his lesser apostles. But he had always wondered if other such artefacts existed in the universe. Other 'weapons', he now supposed.

Elias smiled at the thought of obtaining one, of the power he might hold with it.

'*Brother,*' Narek repeated when Elias didn't answer straight away.

Elias's smile turned into a broad grin that didn't reach his eyes.

'Ready your warriors. We have much work to do.'

**Click here to buy [Vulkan Lives](#).**

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