

DAMOCLES™

PHIL KELLY, GUY HALEY, BEN COUNTER & JOSH REYNOLDS



WARHAMMER
40,000

AN APOCALYPSE ANTHOLOGY

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ANTHOLOGY**

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& JOSH REYNOLDS**



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IT IS THE 41ST MILLENNIUM. FOR MORE THAN A HUNDRED CENTURIES THE EMPEROR HAS SAT IMMOBILE ON THE GOLDEN THRONE OF EARTH. HE IS THE MASTER OF MANKIND BY THE WILL OF THE GODS, AND MASTER OF A MILLION WORLDS BY THE MIGHT OF HIS INEXHAUSTIBLE ARMIES. HE IS A ROTTING CARCASS WRITHING INVISIBLY WITH POWER FROM THE DARK AGE OF TECHNOLOGY. HE IS THE CARRION LORD OF THE IMPERIUM FOR WHOM A THOUSAND SOULS ARE SACRIFICED EVERY DAY, SO THAT HE MAY NEVER TRULY DIE.

YET EVEN IN HIS DEATHLESS STATE, THE EMPEROR CONTINUES HIS ETERNAL VIGILANCE. MIGHTY BATTLEFLEETS CROSS THE DAEMON-INFESTED MIASMA OF THE WARP, THE ONLY ROUTE BETWEEN DISTANT STARS, THEIR WAY LIT BY THE ASTRONOMICAN, THE PSYCHIC MANIFESTATION OF THE EMPEROR'S WILL. VAST ARMIES GIVE BATTLE IN HIS NAME ON UNCOUNTED WORLDS. GREATEST AMONGST HIS SOLDIERS ARE THE ADEPTUS ASTARTES, THE SPACE MARINES, BIO-ENGINEERED SUPER-WARRIORS. THEIR COMRADES IN ARMS ARE LEGION: THE IMPERIAL GUARD AND COUNTLESS PLANETARY DEFENCE FORCES, THE EVER-VIGILANT INQUISITION AND THE TECH-PRIESTS OF THE ADEPTUS MECHANICUS TO NAME ONLY A FEW. BUT FOR ALL THEIR MULTITUDES, THEY ARE BARELY ENOUGH TO HOLD OFF THE EVER-PRESENT THREAT FROM ALIENS, HERETICS, MUTANTS - AND WORSE.

TO BE A MAN IN SUCH TIMES IS TO BE ONE AMONGST UNTOLD BILLIONS. IT IS TO LIVE IN THE CRUELLEST AND MOST BLOODY REGIME IMAGINABLE. THESE ARE THE TALES OF THOSE TIMES. FORGET THE POWER OF TECHNOLOGY AND SCIENCE, FOR SO MUCH HAS BEEN FORGOTTEN, NEVER TO BE RE-LEARNED. FORGET THE PROMISE OF PROGRESS AND UNDERSTANDING, FOR IN THE GRIM DARK FUTURE THERE IS ONLY WAR. THERE IS NO PEACE AMONGST THE STARS, ONLY AN ETERNITY OF CARNAGE AND SLAUGHTER, AND THE LAUGHTER OF THIRSTING GODS.

++MESSAGE BEGINS++
++REF: INQ. OX-322-TAU-DAM-BETA++
++CLASSIFIED AURIC LEVEL – FOR ORDO XENOS
EYES ONLY++

MY LORDS, PLEASE FIND ATTACHED AN INTERCEPTED
XENOS REPORT REGARDING THE CURRENT CONFLICT
IN THE DAMOCLES GULF, PARTICULARLY THE WAR
ON AGRELLAN AND ITS SISTER WORLD BRISEIS. I
HAVE TAKEN THE LIBERTY OF ANNOTATING THIS WITH
TRANSLATIONS FROM THE TAU'S HEATHEN TONGUE.

YOUR SERVANT,
EXPLICATOR ARDAN BALTHIUS, ORDO XENOS

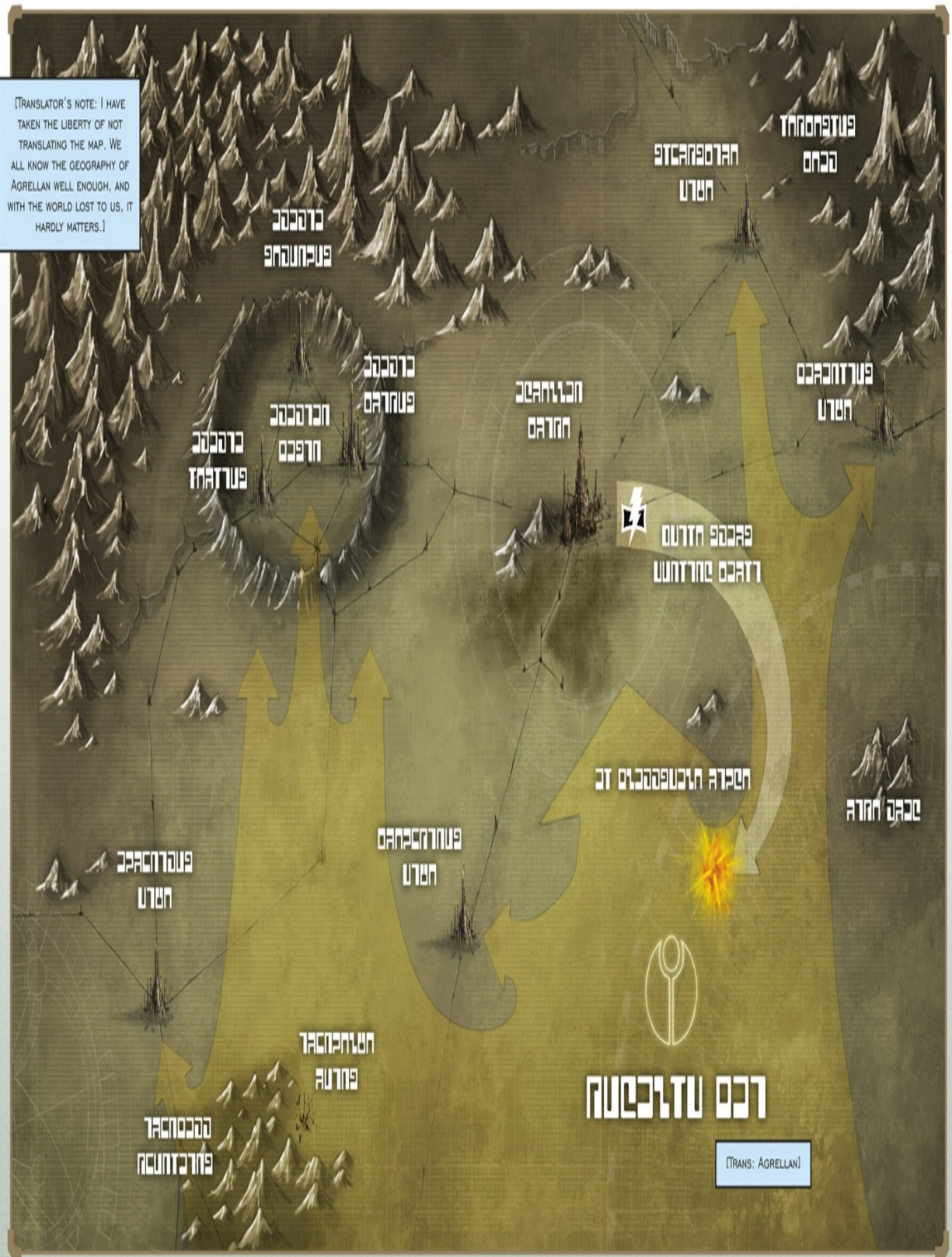
++MESSAGE ENDS++



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[TRANS: (WATER CASTE)
REPORT ON (AGRELLAN)
MAY THE (ETHEREALS) WALK
FOREVER IN LIGHT.]

[TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: I HAVE TAKEN THE LIBERTY OF NOT TRANSLATING THE MAP. WE ALL KNOW THE GEOGRAPHY OF AGRELLAN WELL ENOUGH, AND WITH THE WORLD LOST TO US, IT HARDLY MATTERS.]



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[TRANS: AGRELLAN]



С СУДЖАРАД

[TRANS: COMMANDER SHADOWSUN]

פחלסכאק חקנא

[TRANS: JADE DRAGONS]

[TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: SHOULDER
PAD OF SERGEANT SEANO,
JADE DRAGONS CHAPTER,
ADEPTUS ASTARTES.]



'The Mark of the Beast is its Hide, torn from
its Back by a damned Lord of Chaos. The
Mark is of its Passing, and in its Wake shall
the Heretic be found. Where the Hide hangs,
there the Warp Gods look down upon their
Servants. Where the Hide burns, there burn
also the slaves of the Warp.'

- Codex Noctis Verminion

POWER SWORD
(CHOGORIAN PATTERN)

The White Scars prefer weapons that mimic the design of the ritual blades of their homeworld Chogoris.

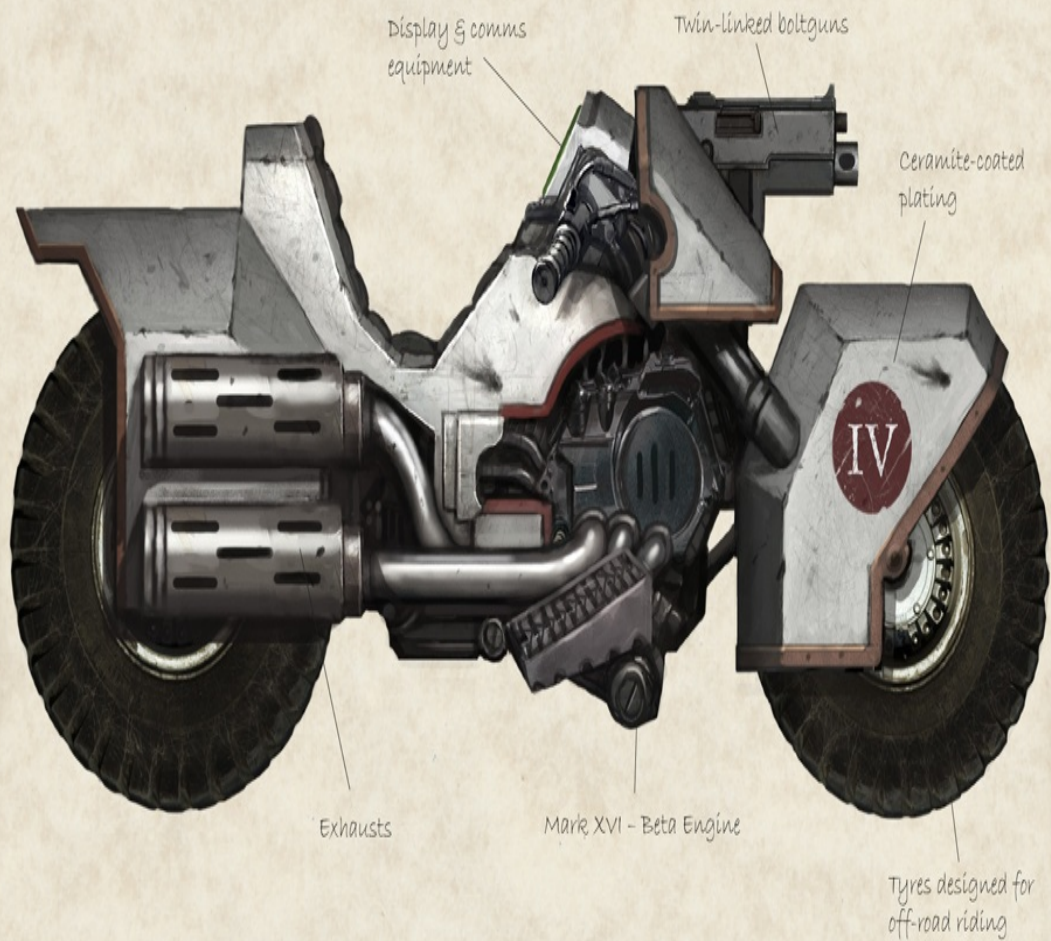


PSYCHIC HOOD

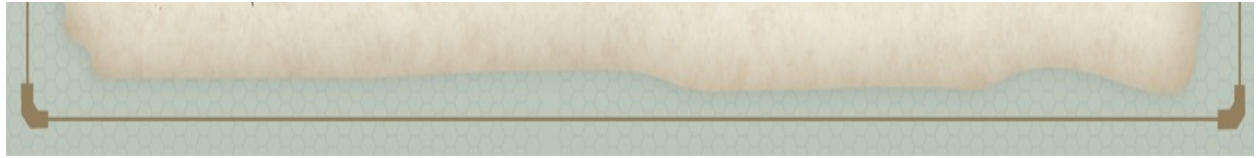
Arcane devices, psychic hoods use half-forgotten crystalline technology to either amplify or dampen the psychic potential of the wearer. This example was worn by White Scars Stormseer Sudabeh during the Agrellan campaign.



SPACE MARINE BIKE



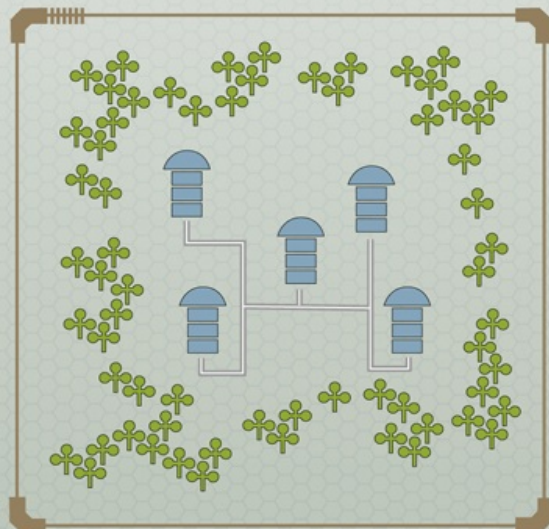
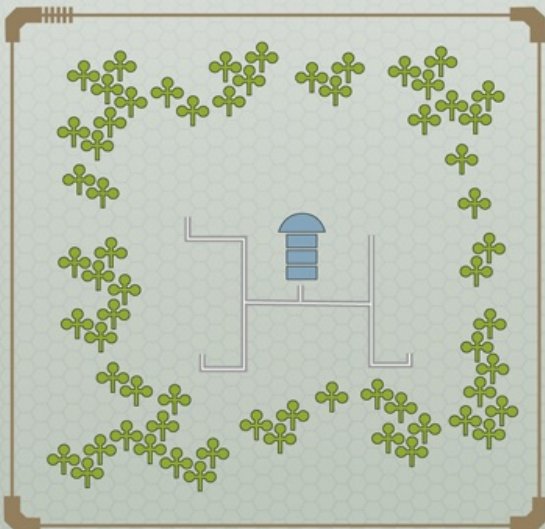
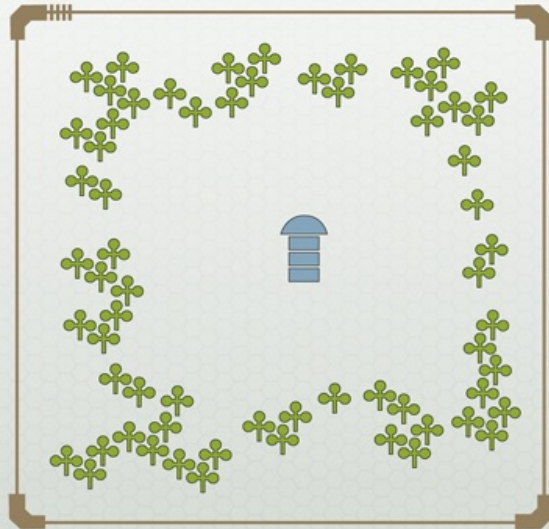
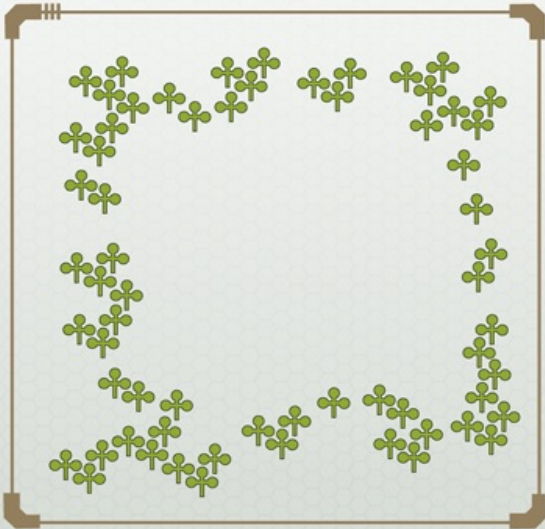
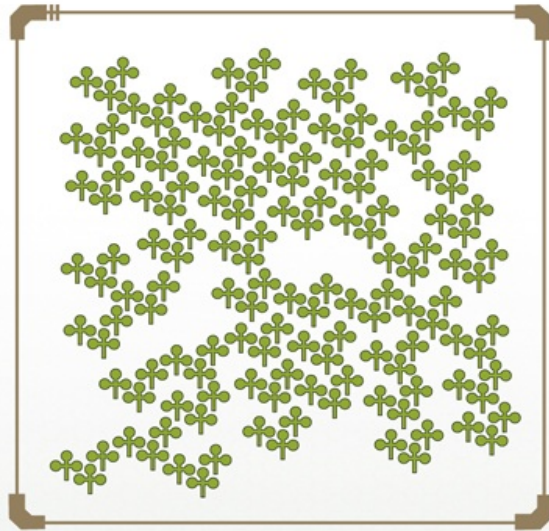
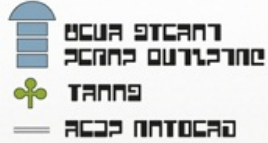
This bike was ridden into battle by Battle-Brother Burilgi of the White Scars Brotherhood of the Running Star. It was recovered from Voltaris after the Tau retreat from that world.



אחראות ופיתוח התחנה והתחנה

[TRANS: (EARTH CASTE) SETTLEMENT
CREATION PRIMER]

[TRANS:
FOUR STOREY
DOMED BUILDING
TREES
ROAD NETWORK]



BLOOD OATH

Phil Kelly

CHAPTER ONE

QUAN ZHOU FORTRESS-MONASTERY OF THE WHITE SCARS CHAPTER, CHOGORIS, 713.999.M41

A thousand decapitated heads. One for every battle-brother in the Chapter.

By the time they had left Tarotian IV, the Third Company's kill count had been closer to a million. He had killed over a hundred rebels himself. It was often the case. But like all White Scars, Kor'sarro knew the value of symbolism, and a round thousand was enough to make the point.

He wanted to be there to see them. An ending, of a sort, a cauterising of the wounds the Chapter had sustained on Tarotian IV.

Kor'sarro Khan stared out into the heat haze of Plain Zhou. From his vantage point within the highest eyrie in the fortress-monastery, it felt like he could see to the edges of the world. His topknot of greasy black hair flew erratically in the thermals, its thick strands mimicking the victory pennants waving high above.

Though the khan's narrowed eyes flicked from scrub to bunker to a herd of stallions galloping in the distance, his hands had their attention elsewhere. Calloused fingers worked mechanically but precisely at the balcony's edge, always in motion. The tip of the khan's curved dagger scratched like an awl, carving the Khorchin word for 'seeking' onto the side of a dormant bolt shell.

Forty-nine more of the deadly little cylinders shone in the evening sun, ranged along the balcony neat as dominos. Those to the khan's left were finished, and those to his right were bare. Three full crates hid in the shadow of the buttress arch, the tiny golden curls of swarf around their base rolled back and forth by a playful wind.

The thud-stride-thud of Sudabeh crossing the eyrie yurut's rugs in full battleplate made the khan's cheek twitch. He placed the last of the shells unfinished to one side.

'Sunning yourself between hunts, my khan?' said the newcomer.

'Stormseer. Your... gifts.' Kor'sarro looked at the sky for a second. 'They are wasted here.'

'Anyone with half a nostril could tell that you've been standing in the sun. If you ever run out of promethium, you could scrape your skin and use the run-off to feed Moondrakkan's engine instead.'

'Ha!' shouted the khan, grinning and clenching his fist in triumph as if Sudabeh had helped him solve a difficult problem. He would not take the Stormseer's bait today, he was in too good a mood for it.

Like all White Scars, Kor'sarro loved to feel the play of the elements first hand. For the last three hours he had been meditating in the boiling heat of Quan Zhou, clad in little more than loose white fatigues. His olive leather skin practically glowed, shining with oily sweat.

The khan raised a thick bare arm covered in zigzag scars, revealing a tuft of armpit hair that protruded from the sutured edge of his torsal glove. 'Have a proper sniff then, naysmith.'

'I respectfully decline your generous proposal,' said Sudabeh, using the formal Chogorian dialect. Both men chuckled, two sets of white teeth sparkling in the sun. They had been Space Marines long enough to know that moments of humanity were to be treasured, no matter how simple. In fact the simpler they came, the better.

The khan pulled a cube of meat the size of his fist from one of the ammunition crates, picking off the largest bits of swarf before taking a massive bite. He turned to face his old friend, stale blood running down his long black moustache as he chewed loudly. Eyebrows knitted in mock concern, he motioned the Stormseer forward, his frown fading to a wet red grin.

Shaking his head in resignation, Sudabeh joined his captain on the balcony. He looked up at his distorted reflection in the silvered, eyeless skulls that were spitted on pikes along the balcony's edge. Most of the trophies were human-sized, but the largest was the size a Land Speeder.

To the south, a large gunmetal lander was lowering its bulk towards the perimeter of Third Bronze Yurut. The squat ship's backblast sent waves of plains-dust outward in concentric circles before its striped underskeleton finally touched down.

'Cargo?' asked Sudabeh, squinting through the dust.

'Trophies,' the khan replied around a mouthful of raw meat.

The bulk lander's front jaw lowered with a distant hiss of hydraulics. One at first, then a dozen, then hundreds upon hundreds of human heads poured down the ramp towards the yurut wall. Though the first to emerge bounced and rolled as if freshly taken from the neck, those spilling over the rear part of the lander's jaw slopped over in a state of advanced decomposition. Their smell was unpleasant on the wind, but the khan's stomach growled in appreciation nonetheless.

'Heretics,' said the khan, savouring the word. 'Tarotian IV.'

Sudabeh nodded thoughtfully. He watched the servitor work-teams retrieve the disembodied heads by the armful and dump them onto the vector carriages parked along the bronze yurut's walls. Inside each carriage, wizened eyethieves rode the cupolas upwards towards the lances that jutted up from the wall's crest. As they went, they took it in turns to stoke the carriage's braziers and burn each trophy's sockets clean with a length of red-hot iron.

Out past the dropsite, steed-beasts broke from distant herds. They galloped in to fall upon those heads left unattended, gnawing strips of meat from faces and scalps before the low blast of the lander's horns drove them away. Part of Kor'sarro longed to be back in the saddle at the head of his tribe, hurling his spear into the flank of some doe-eyed zellion or marauding felid with a taste for human flesh.

'Spit it out, then,' said Kor'sarro.

'My khan?'

'You didn't hide your scars under battleplate just to come out here and bait me, Stormseer. My temper's not that tight.'

'Of course,' said Sudabeh, his tone suddenly formal. 'The astropathic choir has a message for you, my khan. The Third Company is needed on Agrellan immediately. We are to eradicate a tau infestation, as loudly and as memorably as possible.'

'Out of the question,' replied Kor'sarro, but there was doubt under his tone. 'You told me yourself, the Tarot indicates that Blackheart's renegades draw closer with every passing hour. We are needed here, to defend our home world.'

'Our elders have decided that our duty lies elsewhere, my khan,' said Sudabeh. 'Many other companies are ready to repel the Red Corsairs. Chogoris will endure without us, I can feel it. Quan Zhou will stand.'

A wordless pause stretched out, both men staring upward as if Huron Blackheart's fleet would glimmer into being at any moment.

'Tau,' sighed the khan. 'So we face their cursed weapon-magicks again.'

'Indeed,' said Sudabeh. 'I believe they seek to use the planet Agrellan as a staging post in order to seize the mineral-rich tithe worlds on the cusp of the

Damocles Gulf.'

'Agrellan,' the khan continued, fingering his long moustache. 'Dovar System, yes?'

'Correct again.'

'Ha. Terrain?'

'Unremarkable, for the most part. Technically a hive-world, but mostly scorched deserts and open plains.'

The khan's grisly smile reappeared, bits of meat bleeding between his teeth.

'Anything else?'

'It's haunted,' said Sudabeh, matter-of-factly. 'The place was subject to Exterminatus centuries ago. The Malleus alone know why.'

'No doubt they do. The stain of Chaos is not easily erased.'

'As you say. Reading between the lines of the data-slate, it seems the virus bombs left a highly toxic legacy. The planet still bears the marks of its former death, both physically and spiritually.'

'Ghosts, then,' said the khan, shrugging. 'Common enough.'

'Not these ones,' the Stormseer replied.

CHAPTER TWO

IRONDELVE PLAIN SOUTH OF THE ACACIAN BASIN, AGRELLAN, 742.999.M41

A shimmering black dot scarred the centre of the Agrellan sun. It grew by the tiniest of fractions, slowly expanding until it resolved into a smudged figure silhouetted against the blinding orb. Three smaller dots swirled around the figure like electrons orbiting a nucleus. Slowly, steadily, the outline swelled until it eclipsed the sun all but completely.

The figure's lines hardened into those of a tau battlesuit, bulky yet somehow still strangely feminine. The accompanying dots became a trio of discus-like drones, thick antennae canted in a perfect compromise between aerodynamics and sensory acuity. Only thin jet streams in low orbit gave any hint of how this solar angel and her strange attendants had come to earth. The marks of her Orca's passage were two faint scars amongst hundreds of others lining the azure sky.

Then, as soon as the figure and her retinue came within half a mile of the planet's surface, they disappeared.

Commander Shadowsun touched down with such measured delicacy that the puff of dust from Agrellan's scorched surface was barely noticeable.

Her appointment as the face of the Third Sphere expansion had been no accident. Tall for a tau and with a dancer's perfect posture, on those occasions when she wished to be seen, she cut quite a majestic figure. When entering hostile territory, however, her highly sophisticated XV22 battlesuit rendered her

practically invisible.

Technically speaking she could be seen by the naked eye, Shadowsun reminded herself, albeit as nothing more than a vague haze. Tiny cells honeycombed not only the surface of her battlesuit but also her underslung fusion blasters. One side of each sensor cell was a miniscule camera, and the other side a pinpoint hologram array that could replicate that camera's footage with unprecedented accuracy.

Once she was back on her flagship after a military engagement, Shadowsun would transfer the footage from these cameras to a suite of holodrones and walk through a full-spectrum projection of her own performance, analysing, highlighting and consolidating her manoeuvres with the dedication and patience of a master.

The master, come to that.

'Oe-ken-yon, please begin your initial dataharvest,' said Shadowsun, turning to the largest of her three drones. 'Take as much time as you require, my friend. As Commander Puretide taught us, when utilised correctly, the battlefield itself is a potent weapon.'

The drone blipped once in assent and moved away, sensor spectrums panning.

Data was vital in the business of waging war. Shadowsun was one of the three finest tau commanders of her generation, due in no small part to the fact she considered every angle and outcome before committing her forces. Diligence was one of a great many things she had learned on Mount Kanji under the wisdom of Master Puretide. She had absorbed every drop of knowledge she could from dawn to dusk. The perfect pupil, he had called her, albeit only after her training was complete. Those three small words were still the best gifts she had ever received.

For four long years Master Puretide had challenged her with gruelling trials. Trials so harsh she could never forget the lessons she learned from them, even had she wanted to. The lessons were hard won indeed. Her body still bore the scars – scars she sometimes traced when she was alone, dwelling on what she had learned.

Only two other tau in the entire galaxy could truly understand what she had gone through in the name of the Greater Good. Strange young Kais, the Monat Supreme, cadre-of-one and founder of Fi'rios Sept. Kais, and... and the traitor Shoh.

She shuddered, acutely aware of her skin brushing the inside of her suit. No time to think of him now.

'Commander Shadowsun,' blipped her c-link drone, its datatone prim and formal as it returned to her side. 'My report is complete, and ready for your

inspection.'

'My thanks, Drone Commandant Oe-ken-yon,' she transmitted back in kind, rapid-scanning the drone's datacompile with one eye whilst her other remained fixed on her battlesuit's sensor suite, just in case.

There was something strange about Agrellan's data... a feeling of a glitch, rather than the anomaly itself. She dismissed the notion as illogical.

'It appears that the environment itself is hostile, Oe-ken. Not unusual for an Imperial world, and well within the parameters of the earth caste to fix once we have taken this world for the empire. Please remain within shield radius of either Oe-nu or Oe-hei from now on.'

'Affirmed. Any additional, commander?' transmitted Oe-ken-yon.

'Not at this point, little one. Be content to wait.'

Back when she had simply been Shaserra, student of the fire caste academies, Commander Shadowsun had shown great talent in the arts of waging war. She consistently excelled in every simulation and battlescape her mentors could devise. After her training was complete, she had been accorded the signal honour of further study under Commander Puretide himself.

At the foot of her master's hover-throne, she had learnt every nuance and tenet of the martial style that had lain closest to her natural skillset. Hers was the oldest and most well established of all the tau ways of war. It was known formally as *Kauyon*, and informally as the Patient Hunter.

Kilometres below the peak of Mount Kanji, Shadowsun had sat shrouded in snow at the side of a beast-trail for days. Her skin had been as cold as death, and her breathing as shallow as the tiny sighs of a hibernating mouse. She had remained so still that a large family of arctic spiders had used her as a frame for their tickling webs.

Inert as stone, at one with the mountain, when the one-eared snow lynx had finally wandered past her, she had simply lunged out and broken its neck.

Over the decades since her promotion to commander, Shadowsun had honed her natural patience and sense of timing to a lethal point. She had applied it like a scalpel to everything from the delicacies of diplomacy to the sudden destruction of alien battlefleets. And yet, despite her forces having overcome the tau empire's foes for minimal loss on countless occasions, there remained a stubborn few who still questioned her ways.

One in particular.

The traitor Shoh had shunned *Kauyon* from the day they had begun their training together, concentrating solely on *Mont'ka*, the Killing Blow. Just recently Revered Aun'shi, the Ethereal Supreme and speaker of great truths, had told her in person that the Traitor believed the philosophy of *Kauyon* was only

for the weak.

She shook her head in disgust and despair, her smooth brow creased. The idea of ignoring patience in favour of aggression was utterly alien to her. Surely, demonstrably as far as she was concerned, Kauyon was the path that led to the Greater Good. How else to use the foe's own confidence against him, to do the maximum damage at minimum cost to the tau race? The Master himself had often said *'To triumph with the least amount of risk must always be the goal.'* Unlike her headstrong peers, she had listened well.

Shadowsun amped her audio pickups high for a moment, and they relayed the telltale whine of a nearby VX1-0 dronet gathering topographical data. Behind it was the high, triple purr of a Piranha squadron on patrol. High above the T-shaped skimmers, Manta missile destroyers hummed by in stately grace. Each of the giant supercraft was enacting one of Shadowsun's overlapping heavy recon loops, scouring Agrellan's surface for signs of the foe. Their airborne comrades would detect the blundering fools of the Imperium before long; the patterns on her suit's distribution array described overlapping geometries that would have pleased even the most precise earth caste scientist.

There was something else there, though, something on the data-cusp. She blink-masked the audiosigns she recognised, cutting out all background elements until all she was left with was a subtle susurrus over a baseline of white noise.

The anomalous waveform was not regular, like that of a machine, but something with the erratic spike of the biological. In fact – she isolated it and amped it high – it sounded a lot like distant whispers.

'Commander!' boomed her audio bead, jolting her senses. 'Stealth team report!'

She spun round, shield drones flying to her flanks. Her sensor suite's blacksun filter revealed the ghostly heat signatures of a dozen XV25 Stealth suits. Whilst she had been lost in her reverie, Shas'vere Draï and his team had been standing behind her in full salute formation.

'Stealth team until it suits you!' she spat, her hot spike of anger simmering to cold disapproval in the space of a few heartbeats. 'This is a sub-optimal time to show off, Shas'vere Draï. We are within warzone parameters.'

'I offer contrition, my commander,' said Draï, his body language deferential even in the swollen bulk of his battlesuit.

Even the fire caste's standard-issue stealth field generators were advanced enough to baffle the senses. Without state of the art optical sensors, Draï and his teammates would have been little more than heat shimmers against the cracked and lifeless landscape. That was little excuse for one with a multispectrum sensor suite, though. Shadowsun blamed her momentary lapse of concentration

on the strange whisper-hiss that had distracted her. She still felt on edge even now.

It was a well-known fact amongst the fire caste that Drai's mastery of the silent approach more than made up for his habit of announcing his presence as loudly as possible, whether with a formal greeting or a salvo from the truncated burst cannon that formed his battlesuit's right arm.

'Have your assessments reached a satisfactory conclusion, my commander?' asked Drai.

'They have, Drai, and I thank you for your inquiry. No Imperial forces have been pinpointed as yet, though at least three capital-class transport ships have made planetfall to my knowledge. I have assigned forward bait elements.'

'And the planet itself, my commander?'

Shadowsun stepped back and to the side, revealing the c-link drone behind her. 'Oe-ken?'

The drone rose slightly. 'Designation Imperial hive-world, human population approximate 16.7 billion, apex conurbation Agrellan Prime,' said Oe-ken. His artificial voice was strangely lyrical, as if he were reciting an abstract poem. 'Surface primarily plainsland, topographical map appended. Atmosphere highly toxic to all carbon-based clades, anomalous readings high...'

'Excellent. I believe that will be sufficient for now, Oe-ken,' interrupted Shadowsun. 'We can assimilate the rest from your compile. We do not want the *gue'la* brutes alerted to our presence by you rattling out every last finding, after all.'

'Rattling, commander?' said Oe-ken, his elevation sinking.

'An artefact of speech,' said Shadowsun, waving the comment away. 'I meant no aspersion.'

The tau's artificial intelligences were hard-wired to behave as much like their makers as possible in all social situations, and Oe-ken-yon was the most advanced of his kind. Regardless of size or duty, every drone strived to emulate its masters and fit in seamlessly with tau culture. It was a safety measure that covered most eventualities. When a purely objective viewpoint was necessary, personality protocols could be temporarily deactivated at a single blip.

Such a course of action had proved problematic in the past – the disastrous Pech Incident was one example. In recent years, the earth caste had made it standard practice to build the tau empire's artificial intelligences with a personality best suited their role. Even so, Shadowsun often wondered if a machine that could simulate emotion wasn't just as likely to affect operational efficiency as one without it.

'May I append an observation, Commander Shadowsun?' said Oe-nu quietly

as it hovered in close.

The MV52, much like lesser shield drones, had twin projector aerials that reminded Shadowsun of the plain-hoppers she used to catch on Vior'la as a child.

'By all means, Oe-nu.'

'The background electromagnetic field upon Agrellan is having a detrimental effect on my battery source, commander. I cannot guarantee optimum performance throughout.'

'Noted, little helper, but in truth you say that every time. It is rare that I deploy the fire caste into an idyllic environment.'

'This time is different, Commander Shadowsun,' the drone whined. It dipped the front of its rim in a gesture of dutiful obedience. 'Rest assured that in the interests of longevity, Oe-hei and I will utilise the least possible amount of energy in order to ensure your protection. We shall not use one iota more than necessary.'

'That is... indeed reassuring, Oe-nu. Thank you in advance.'

'Merely doing our duty, Commander Shadowsun,' the drone said obsequiously, dipping its disc-like body once more before withdrawing to slowly orbit its mistress.

'May I ask what you make of these anomalous readings, my commander?' said Shas'vere Draï, tapping his sensor antenna with the quad-barrelled end of his burst cannon.

'Of course. I believe they are residuals, echoes of a sort after some cataclysmic event. That would certainly fit with the geological samples my punch-cylinders have taken thus far.'

'A robust theory, my commander... up to a point,' said Draï warily.

'I realise it is the nature of the cataclysm that concerns you, Shas'vere Draï, but I would not divert attention to it at this point. We have more pressing data to obtain.'

As Shadowsun finished her sentence, a sheet of red shapes flared across the topographical display above her command suite.

'Excellent. The air caste have located the Imperial vessels. Approach on my mark.'

As one, the Stealth suits and their drone escorts rose into the air, revolved eight degrees west, and hovered invisibly towards the Acacian Basin.

The hive cities of Agrellan were truly mighty examples of their kind. Giant, slab-sided monstrosities, they reminded Shadowsun of insect mounds out on the Vior'lan plain. Each spire-dotted metropolis was teeming with human life, and

somewhere within the basin were the occupants of the three Imperial vessels that had escaped the air caste's lethal attentions. Finding their exact location would not be easy. At Oe-ken-yon's estimation, the entire population of Shadowsun's home sept could have fit within the endless levels of the nearest hive and still had its upper half to spare.

According to the latest scans, the sides of each hive were dotted with gun nests, laser banks, gravity mine channels, ferrocrete plates, observation towers and docking plates. Sculptures of alien saints and living gargoyles loomed and crawled upon its facades, each a hideous reflection of the heroic monuments that stood outside each tau training academy. Shadowsun felt a forbidden twinge of excitement at the idea of smashing the human icons to dust.

As the commander and her skimmer-borne cadres sped towards the mountain range that girdled the hives, she found herself recalling the day she had personally destroyed the statue of Shoh that stood outside his old battle dome. That had been a day long talked about. The traitor's despicable sympathisers had branded her the Iconoclast, after that.

She rather liked the term.

The vast caldera that formed the walls of the basin loomed up ahead, the narrow pass at its southernmost point guarded by a kilometre-high gate-fortress. The giant bastion looked every bit as indomitable as the peaks around it, and infinitely more deadly.

'A warrior who wears his strength openly is easily countered,' she said to herself, imagining her master's stony glare. She remembered learning that particular lesson well, after her boasts that neither Shoh nor Kais had a hope of finding her when she wished to remain unseen. Master Puretide had commanded her to prove it. All those weeks she had thought her bond-mates were looking for her, all those painful hours sat stewing in her tree-stump, hoping to be discovered. Master Puretide had never sent them out at all. She had eventually slunk back, starving and chastened, having missed out on almost a month of training. The Master had turned her greatest strength into punishing weakness with a single off-the-cuff command. It was an object lesson in humility – a quality the Imperium of Man had left behind long ago.

She blipped the cadre-level datanet, denoting the looming fortress's icon. 'Needless to say,' she transmitted, 'we will not stray within range of that ridiculous thing.'

Symbols of affirmation blinked over each team's icons. She eye-flicked alternative lines of approach across the mountains lining the basin, coloured pathways that zigzagged in from a dozen different points on the outside of the

mountain range that girdled the basin. The air caste's satellite scans, overlaid with the topography from the dronenets, had given her a hundred potential routes of approach, each shielded from hive artillery and remote gun nests. She would need no more than a handful of them to lure the Imperials into her trap.

The cadres fanned out from a dust storm of their own creation, circumnavigating the giant caldera's toxic peaks and joining the routes designated to them without slowing. Over and around the mountains they went, grav-skimmers, drones and battlesuits keeping in tight formation as they hovered up gullies, glaciers and crevasses.

The skies flared white for a second, right on cue. The explosion left a concentric ring of light expanding high above the basin, as hypnotic to the hives' sensor arrays as it was to mortal eyes.

After securing victory in space scant hours before, the air caste's commanders had been only too pleased to grant Shadowsun's request for a grand distraction. The Supreme Admiral, Kor'O Li'men Ka, had transmitted back in person. The detonation of *In Vigilus*, an Imperial wreck burning in high orbit, would form a perfect coda to their symphony of supremacy.

The death throes of the *In Vigilus* had bought Shadowsun a few seconds of electromagnetic backwash, a space of time in which the Imperial scanners were rendered blind and the Acacian Basin was lit in stark monochrome. In the blinking aftermath of those stolen seconds, every cadre hiding behind the lip of their respective mountains slid smoothly over the crest and boosted neatly into new hiding places.

'Phase two is complete, commander,' said Oe-ken, floating just behind Shadowsun.

'Yes, thank you, Oe-ken, I have already observed that,' she replied through a smile. 'It's phase three that will prove critical.'

'I concur. It must be most satisfying to physically demonstrate the supremacy of the Greater Good in such a manner,' the drone said wistfully.

'It is pleasing to do so, but it is data I seek at this stage, not violence. Thankfully the air caste keep extensive records of the sigils and markings that the Imperium displays upon its battleships. According to my contacts, the first of the three vessels to have made planetfall upon Agrellan contains common gue'la soldiers and their support vehicles. The second, and this is the one I believe we must locate at all costs, contains the *gue'ron'sha* that the humans call Space Marines. I trust you are familiar with their reputation.'

'I have assessed all available data. And the contents of the third vessel?' prompted Oe-ken.

'Unrecognised, and that has me intrigued. The ship has a cavernous cargo

hold, though, and its symbol appears to be the riding-beast the humans call a “horse”. The water caste have appended the name ‘Terryn,’ along with a report that seems to have been made in haste.’

‘Cross-correlating... hard data not found. Commander,’ it said ruefully, ‘past the designation “Terryn” there’s very little on the fire caste databases about this warship.’

‘Interesting. Perhaps it contains beast-riding warriors, much as the kroot like to use. Keep searching, Oe-ken. I would rather not have any unwelcome surprises when the time comes to enact the takeover. Still, do not fear, little helper. We will force them to commit their strength, and the data will flow.’

On Shadowsun’s command suite, the fire caste’s icons were sliding down the mountainsides into their designated zones. As the glare of the air caste’s high-orbit diversion gave way to dull moonlight, each cadre’s heavy elements began to move into position. Hammerhead and Skyray gunships prowled forward, each flanked by Devilfish transports, a wall of sleek ochre tanks waiting to show their true colours as killing machines.

It was then that the hives awoke from their slumber.

The skies were filled with such thunder it made a Vior’lan deathstorm look tame. Heavy munitions roared downward in a hail of shells that could tear a ferrocrete bunker apart as easily as it could a wooden box. The air above the Acacian Basin was darkened by the firepower roaring out of the hives, each Imperial metropolis hurling everything it could at the interlopers approaching their position.

Yet despite all the fury, despite all the noise, not a single tau life signal faded to charcoal on Shadowsun’s command suite.

The commander smiled thinly as she watched the Imperial hives vent their mindless, pointless wrath. Go on, she thought. Waste your ammunition. Waste as much as you like.

The hive cities that dotted the Imperium grew almost organically over the centuries. New structures and statues were erected even as old ones sloughed away, complicating the already labyrinthine structures with every dubious new addition. Even comparatively young hives were so large, so moribund in their construction, that they were crippled by their own immense proportions. To Shadowsun, they were like fat old men that had undergone reconstructive surgery one too many times.

During their approach to the Acacian Basin, Shadowsun had used the air caste’s orbital data to determine the location of each of the hive’s guns, and their possible fields of fire. She had correlated them against the data streams transmitted by each cadre’s pathfinder teams, projecting the elevation range of

those guns and their estimated reach.

Using Oe-ken's formidable processing banks, she had then constructed a three-dimensional map of each hive's blind spots. The charcoal grey of death denoted those areas covered by its guns, and healthy gold lit the zones that the hive's bulk had occluded from its own sight. Her cadres' symbols had glided into the golden slivers of safety overlaid on the master map she had transmitted. If her calculations were correct – and they invariably were – the warriors inside these zones were fundamentally safe.

Convinced of their own idiot brawn, the hive's gunners threw obscene amounts of ordnance towards the tau tanks lurking on their perimeters. They achieved nothing more than swathing the valley with shrouds of dust and foul-smelling smoke.

It took the best part of an hour before the Imperials realised their mistake. It was time enough for Shadowsun to prepare detailed battle plans and approach vectors for every team under her command, and to arrange for the basin's lines of reinforcement to be cut off.

The cutting of the supply lines connecting each hive was a simple enough matter. The vast bulk of the Imperium's armour took the form of tracked vehicles, so the air caste made neutralisation runs in the arid deserts between each hive, staying out of range of the Imperial guns to drop pulse bombs where the ferrocrete superhighways were weakest. Whenever the Imperium's scrambled reinforcements left the ruined roads in favour of the parched wastes, they would throw up clouds of dust that would hang in Agrellan's poisonous air. With such advance warning of their foes' approach, the fire caste's anti-gravity skimmers could roam the planet unimpeded.

Once the last of the metallic mountains finally fell silent, Shadowsun slunk forward invisibly, the stealth elements of each of her cadres advancing on her cue. Barely a swirl of smoke marked their passage.

They had reached the gold zones next to each hive before the echoes of the Imperial bombardment had stopped resounding from the mountainsides.

Then the heavy elements of the tau cadres took their turn.

The distinctive whip-crack of heavy railgun fire rang out across the basin, a quiet, precise sound after the tooth-rattling roar of the hive's guns. The hypervelocity rounds they projected left tunnels of displaced air in their wake. Smoke and dust swirled around them like desert spirits startled from a lamp. The rounds thudded deep into the exterior slabs, at first achieving little more than to introduce a series of artificial fault lines. Yet each Hammerhead's target had not been chosen at random.

Pathfinder teams debarked from the Devilfish transports and painted each impact site with their markerlights. Moments later, massed squadrons of Skyray missile ships sent seekers soaring after the railgun volleys. The guided missiles detonated with pinpoint accuracy, each volley bringing hundreds of tonnes of ferrocrete tumbling down.

To a casual observer, the hives had been grazed, nothing more. To those that could perceive the heat signatures of each hive's walls, every exit, hangar and missile bay was at least partially buried by a small avalanche of rubble.

The gold zones on Shadowsun's command readout blinked, reconfigured and multiplied, a geometric landscape of possibilities that Oe-ken-yon updated for each encircling cadre to exploit.

'Warriors of the fire caste, you may take these ugly monstrosities apart at your leisure,' transmitted Shadowsun. 'They cannot harm you now.'

CHAPTER THREE

HIVE ACACIA SECUNDUS ACACIAN BASIN AGRELLAN, 742.999.M41

A gun-studded slab of ferrocrete that could have crushed a Titan slid inexorably down the central spire of Hive Acacia Secundus. It crashed through the concentric circles of the hive's waist and toppled sideways with majestic slowness, flattening a swathe of the underdistricts as it thundered to a halt. Rock dust billowed upwards as secondary landslides took yet more of the hive's outer layer with them.

Kor'sarro Khan grimaced. With the hives as densely populated as they were, that little disaster would have claimed tens of thousands, perhaps millions of human lives. If these xenos were allowed to continue their methodical destruction of the Acacian Basin, the death toll would soon reach the billions.

'This has gone on long enough,' the khan said to Sudabeh. 'Let the others look to their own battles.'

'Hives of this size can withstand a lot of punishment, my khan,' replied Sudabeh. 'Would it not be better to wait for Patriarch Tybalt's Knights, or for Redstone's Devils at the very least? With their help, we could cripple the foe's chances of escape.'

The khan just frowned, staring out as more tau missiles arced into the weak points of the hive's architecture. Another set of spires crashed down, taking a wide strip of barnacle-habs to a dusty death.

'No,' said the khan, turning on his heel. 'Mobilise and deploy all air units,' he voxed to his men. 'I want both Thunderhawks with a full complement and in the

air immediately. Two outriders at all times.'

A series of terse acknowledgements crackled in response from the Third Company's sergeants and Techmarine pilots.

Sudabeh sighed heavily, picking up his totemic staff and making his way after his captain on his way to the *Kisma's* launch deck.

'It'll be good for them,' said the khan over his shoulder, loosening Moonfang in its scabbard.

The *Kisma*, the Imperial drop-ship that had seen the White Scars to their landing site, was a fat-bellied whale of a craft. It had been built to withstand direct barrage from warships a size category larger than itself. Just as well, for its sides were still buckled and burning from its terrifying journey planetside.

The *Kisma's* ablative armour robbed it of a great deal of potential speed, a fact that had gnawed at the patience of the White Scars within just as acid eats at metal. Yet after communing with the Emperor's Tarot, the Stormseer Sudabeh had ordained the *Kisma* the safest vector of approach. Given that the Imperial fleet was being torn apart by a lethal assault from tau airspace, the khan had been ill-disposed to argue with him.

The *Kisma* had done her job well enough, bearing them safely if inelegantly to the planet's surface. It was no longer the time for caution. Now was the time for speed.

The Thunderhawks *Khan Spear* and *Headseeker* roared out from the underflank launch bays of the drop-ship like missiles from the wings of an immense fighter plane. Burning upwards on trails of refined promethium, they raced around the basin's inner mountainsides, keeping to the smoking clouds as they banked parallel to Hive Acacia Primus.

In theory both of the assault gunships had firepower enough to take on a scout-class Titan. In the case of *Khan Spear*, the fact was indisputable. The long-barrelled turbo-laser destructor mounted atop the *Spear* was powerful enough to punch through one side of a hive spire to the other. During the Tarotian Suppression, the khan had seen it obliterate half a kilometre of plasteel, ferrocrete, and adamantium in one searing, blinding blast. It was one of the khan's most favourite weapons in all the galaxy. Though it greatly irritated the *Spear's* dour Techmarine pilot, Debedian, Kor'sarro would often shout out targeting solutions during an aerial engagement, claiming the credit if the subsequent kill shot hit home.

Even shorn of its dorsal cannon the Thunderhawk could still embarrass a battle tank. Under its primary wings were sets of Hellstrike missiles whose individual payloads could collapse a hab-block. Lascannons graced its secondary

wingtips, and twinned heavy bolter arrays swivelled on gimbals under the frontal stabiliser fins. White as snapped bone and marked by the lightning-split ingot of the White Scars, the Thunderhawk was the pride of the company's armoured elite. Its opposite number, the *Headseeker*, was just as formidable a sight. These were no mere aircraft, but deadly and sacred relics released from their sanctums to wage the bloodiest of wars.

As the Thunderhawks set a breakneck pace, two pairs of Stormtalon gunships came alongside them. Each craft was a balled fist of stub-nosed guns and powerful engines. The Techmarine pilots at the helm of each escort craft levelled long-range auspex scans at the plains, binding their findings together in a lattice to better inform their charges of the tapestry of battle.

The *Khan Spear*'s engines flared as it pushed ahead of *Headseeker*, arrowing round the lee of the hive in a tight arc. Inside its passenger holds three squads of White Scars grinned as G-forces pulled hard at their flesh. The valley shook with raw sound as the Thunderhawks came hurtling into full view of the tau ground forces, the element of surprise made manifest. Up ahead the tau vehicles had formed a series of dense wedges, their deployment seemingly at random. The tip of each formation pointed towards the hive.

'Why in the Emperor's...' said Kor'sarro. Suddenly it hit him. 'Sudabeh! They are in the blind spots of their prey!'

'I can believe it,' voxed back Sudabeh. 'I told you they were cunning.'

'Ha. Not cunning enough,' said the khan, leering as the *Spear* lanced towards the nearest of the tau wedges.

For a split second the Thunderhawk's turbo-laser destructor stabbed out in a boiling, blinding column. The *Spear* hurtled past, leaving behind a smoking gully where a quartet of tau hover-tanks had been moments before. Leaning over Debedian's shoulder the khan chuckled darkly, already tapping the next targets on the Techmarine's screen.

From the smoky gloom up ahead, dull flickers of light turned to hammering cylinders of force as the next tank wedge's railguns took pot shots at the approaching Space Marine craft.

'*Headseeker*, attend us,' voxed Kor'sarro, 'stop skulking in our slipstream and make your presence felt.'

In answer the heart of the tau wedge up ahead was wrenched into the air by a blossoming black explosion, thick pieces of xenos tank spinning off in all directions.

The *Headseeker*'s primary weapon was not a laser like its brother the *Spear*, but a heavily modified battle cannon. No ordinary breach gun, this was a piece of ordnance longer than a Leman Russ tank. When passing over dense urban

environments, the weapon was difficult to use in anything other than a suppression role. Out in the open, the full force of its destructive power could be brought to bear.

Another shell hammered into the scattering tau tanks, and great plumes of toxic earth flew upward. Within them were more ochre hulls, entire squadrons sent spinning into the smoke. As the *Headseeker* launched its Hellstrike missiles with a chain of whooshing roars, the skimmers on the edge of the formation backed away. They were too slow. A triple detonation blasted into the gun-tanks at the tip of the wedge, two of them flipping over before their burning remains crunched to a halt.

‘Better shoot sharp, Debedian,’ said the khan, leaning in so close the Techmarine could smell the raw meat on his captain’s breath. ‘The *Headseeker*’s catching up.’

Then the world turned black.

Hive Acacia Secundus had finally taken the shot it had been waiting for, and a shell the size of a maglift had detonated amongst the tau tanks scattering at the Thunderhawks’ attack. Mort-signals blaring, the *Spear* bucked and rolled as the macrocannon shell’s blast turned the air tornado fierce. Debedian’s helm chattered machine code as he fought not only to appease the ship’s machine-spirit but also to wrestle its steering array at the same time. A century of dutiful maintenance had bought the dour Techmarine some leeway with the Thunderhawk, and the gunship allowed itself to be brought back under control.

The *Spear* pulled back up alongside its brother the *Headseeker*, both soot-streaked gunships ploughing out of the black wall of smoke and angling towards the next wedge of tau armour. Though one of their Stormtalon escorts had been caught in the hive’s vengeful strike, the other three escort craft burst from the billowing clouds intact.

They were not alone.

Commander Shadowsun’s frown was lit by a wildfire of flashing red icons. The gue’ron’sha had revealed themselves, their giant gunships soaring through the air high above. They were most definitely making their presence felt.

‘Primary threat denoted,’ Shadowsun transmitted. ‘All units at hives one and two, continue apace. Hive three units relocate, staggered pattern southward, seventh wedge first. Watch your gold zones. Once the strike passes, resume serrated echelons. Hammerheads continue destruction duty, Skyrays cover the air. For the Greater Good.’

Symbols of assent flashed in instant affirmation, blinking everywhere around the crescent of tank wedges that surrounded the hive.

Shadowsun's command suite blipped audio. 'This is Team Vre'Esta reporting a pair of direct seeker hits on the primary target. Damage minimal. Requesting optimised targeting solution.'

'Continue to occupy their attention, Vre'Esta,' Shadowsun transmitted back. 'The air caste will deliver the kill. Admiral Li'men Ka, proceed immediately.'

'Affirmed, commander,' transmitted the air caste admiral. 'Razorsharks inbound. Air superiority will be secured in a matter of minutes.'

Two triangular sets of blue-grey darts appeared on Shadowsun's sensor screen, falling in behind the gue'ron'sha gunship icons as they curved towards the next armoured wedge.

'They have taken the bait, Draï,' said Shadowsun to the ghostly shimmer next to her. 'Stay alert.'

Shas'vre Draï had known his commander a long time. The moment before the kill was always the same.

Under her rapid commands and cold demeanour, a smile was waiting to pounce.

The khan was not pleased.

'You let three enemy craft on your tail? Get rid of them!' he shouted, hammering his fist onto the pilot throne right next to Debedian's russet helmet.

The *Spear* banked right with surprising agility for such a massive craft, then left and up, roaring high before plunging down into the smoke. Though the Stormtalon gunships struggled to stay close to their charges, three blunt-nosed, T-shaped craft hung right behind each Thunderhawk as if mindlinked to their machine-spirits.

'Shake them off or kill them, Techmarine,' said Kor'sarro, 'unless you want me to do it for you.'

Debedian merely inclined his head slightly before throwing his craft into more evasive manoeuvres. The T-shaped xenos craft stayed the course, the energy cannons underneath their long tails spitting blue-white pulses of ionic energy. Mort-signals flared on the control panel as the Thunderhawk's engines took several direct hits.

Suddenly the two Stormtalon gunships were back, bursting out of the smoke banks beneath to interpose themselves between the *Spear* and its pursuers. Incredibly, both of the one-man escort craft flew after the Thunderhawk whilst facing backwards, the rotary engine pods on their flanks canted a full half-circle so their pilots could see the foe.

The paired assault cannons underslung beneath each Stormtalon whirred, spitting bullets in a stream so solid it forced one of the xenos fighter craft to peel

off. A moment later the first escort craft's skyhammer launchers sent a volley of air-to-air missiles streaking out, smashing into the retreating pursuer and blasting it apart in an explosion of purple flame.

The other two xenos craft came in close, missiles of their own rising up from hidden compartments on their wings and lancing out to follow the Thunderhawk's powerful heat signature. One seeker whooshed under the *Spear*'s wing, but the other three detonated amongst the Thunderhawk's engines. Smoke plumed and flames coughed as the *Spear* lost speed, the upper spires of the hive blurring past within arm's reach of the wing.

The second of the two Stormtalons suddenly dropped into the smoke below, its engine pods twisting as its opposite number laid down suppressing fire. The two remaining xenos fighters closed in, quad turrets panning stuttering ion streams towards the flaming ruin of the Thunderhawk's engines.

With a tight lateral swerve, the first Stormtalon hurled itself into the path of the deadly blue-white energies spitting from the closest xenos craft. The ion streams hit home, burning right through the armourglass of the gunship's canopy and coring its pilot in his seat.

As the gunship's wreckage spiralled downwards, the second burst upward from the smoke banks right behind both of the T-shaped fighters. Assault cannons blazing, the Stormtalon's typhoon launchers filled the sky with blossoming flak. Its wrath was all but indiscriminate, for though its pilot scored several inadvertent hits on the Thunderhawk, he knew the *Spear* could shrug off the threat of solid shot firepower without incident.

Not so the xenos craft pursuing it. The barrage tore gaping holes in the fuselage of both tau fighters, sending them veering out of control. First one fell, then the other, spiralling away to crash headlong into the hive city below. The victorious escort came alongside the *Spear*, voxing the all-clear as the gunship banked around for another killing pass.

Shadowsun watched the last of the Razorsharks wink red and disappear on her sensor suite. Though one of the giant Imperial craft had been trapped in a crossfire of seeker missiles and forced to disengage, the other, despite taking severe damage to its engines, had been bought a reprieve by its ugly little escort. The gunship's symbol pulsed white and active on her screen as it veered around the hive's largest spire for another attack run.

She would make it suffer for its tenacity.

'I must affect direct intervention. Oe-nu, electrofield lock onto my back, please. Maximum shield, or at least what you feel you can part with. Draï, please take care of Oe-ken and Oe-hei down here. I cannot let that vulgar craft up there

take another chunk out of our armoured comrades.'

'Affirmed, my commander,' said Draï, his tone rueful at the thought of his commander fighting alone.

Shadowsun saluted briefly with her fusion blasters before rocketing up from her command position at the edge of the hive, battlesuit jets flaring white. Knowing well that her stealth cells struggled to cope at extreme velocities, she ordered the nearest Skyray gunships to mask her approach by firing seeker missiles parallel to her coordinates. From a distance her ascent looked much like a set of munitions arcing towards the human gunship as it came about for another attack run.

Shadowsun broke off her headlong charge as the seekers detonated harmlessly upon the Imperial gunship's underside, instead cutting in horizontal to match the giant gue'ron'sha vessel's velocity. Once her suit had synched its speed with the gunships, she touched down with both feet on the broadest part of its primary wing and blink-pushed the electrofields that would lock her steady. Maniac winds wrenched at her armour as the hive's spires blurred past at dizzying speed. As she had known it would be, her battlesuit was up to the task, and held her in place.

It was a constant danger to the battlesuit pilot that within their control cocoon they felt danger only as a removed, academic emotion. One wrong step up here, Shadowsun reminded herself, and she could be twisted in half by the torque of the Thunderhawk's aerial rampage.

'Intercept phase complete,' she blipped to Draï, aiming her deadly fusion blasters at the middle of the giant craft's wing.

Twin beams of molten white light blazed out, scoring through the skin of the wing and leaving a finger-wide furrow across its length. Shadowsun blink-pushed a memogram in disbelief. She checked her gun readouts; they were still practically at full charge. Fusion blasters were designed to cut through bulkheads. They should have taken the wing clean off.

A side panel on the Thunderhawk's prow clanged open, and a towering, armoured beast of a human burst out.

For a split second, Shadowsun was impressed.

The giant in the ornate white armour had pulled himself up onto the frontal stabiliser fins with an athlete's agility. He crouched, leapt, and smashed bodily into the secondary wings jutting from the gunship's hull barely five paces from her. Even through her suit she felt the dull thud of his exosuit's mag-clamps fastening his boots to the fuselage, locking him fast before the tumultuous forces that roared around them could tear him off. She raised her fusion blasters and

fired, but the gue'ron'sha had already ducked behind the secondary wing.

The figure came out the other side hard, an archaic sword glimmering in his double grip. His mag-clamps thudded on the wing as he closed the distance. With the exaggerated slowness of a dream, she knee-folded to the left and aimed into the Space Marine's midsection. The square barrel of her fusion blaster was tugged by a sudden surge of turbulence, and the deadly energies went wide.

Shadowsun had already muted the raging wind and the craft's screaming engines, every sense bent towards her attacker. Her sensor suite's autotrans picked up the figure's battle cry as he barrelled forwards, blade raised.

' - - - FOR THE GREAT KHAN - - - DIE XENOS WITCH - - - '

There was a brilliant flash as the Space Marine's glowing sword arced down, only to strike the invisible shield of force that Oe-nu was projecting around Shadowsun. Taking her chance, the commander lifted her right boot and kicked out hard, blink-setting its plates to maximum repulsion. Her kick struck the Space Marine in the knee just as her electromagnetic push broke that leg's mag-clamp grip. Reeling, the human turned his one-legged stagger into a pivot, raised his great blade in one hand, and brought it down in a powerful diagonal slash. The air crackled in a confusion of light as the gue'ron'sha's powered sword fought Oe-nu's shieldsphere.

A split second later a volley of mass-reactive shells spat from the heavy bolters beneath the Thunderhawk's stabiliser fins. The bolts slammed into Shadowsun's side and detonated with violent force, blasting her clear from the Thunderhawk's wing and sending her spiralling down towards the hive below.

Alert signifiers blazed across Shadowsun's coresystem as she plummeted towards the jagged spires, a dozen critical readings fighting for her attention on her damage control hub. Panic gripped her, panic and the unbidden sensation of whispery laughter.

Only with total focus can we avoid the falling blade.

Shadowsun exhaled slowly, eyes wide as she processed and enacted several subroutines at the speed of thought. To her left hive levels flashed past, scattered lights and sneering gargoyles blurred by her spiralling descent. She rerouted power from her weapons, from her command suite, even from Oe-nu's shields. All of it, every iota, she poured it into her battlesuit's damaged jetpack.

It coughed once, twice, and then caught.

She felt relief spike through her, eclipsing the searing pain in her lower back as a fantail of flames billowed out from her armour. The heat was unbearable. She released as much sealant gel as she could as her vertical plummet levelled out and then turned into a wobbly ascent. As she climbed, she narrowly avoided the sainted colossi that bracketed the hive's postern gate.

Rerouting her power to normal hazard settings, Commander Shadowsun flickered and disappeared. As the battered Thunderhawk disappeared from sight behind the hive spires, the collared necks of the two largest postern statues blazed white in a wide garrotting loop.

The solemn, sacred heads of the stone saints nodded as if falling asleep and toppled over, tumbling down into the underhive to claim yet more human lives.

CHAPTER FOUR

HIVE AGRELLAN PRIME ACACIAN BASIN AGRELLAN, 743.999.M41

The White Scars had regrouped in the triumphal boulevard that led to Agrellan Prime's monolithic Gate Victorious. Their battle-scarred Thunderhawks had set down amidst the sprawling Victorious skyshields and were already being attended to by their Techmarines, each glad of their narrow escape during the battle in the Acacian Basin.

Mechanicus-grade incense wafted around the stricken gunships as the repairs began in earnest. White-armoured tactical squads marched out from their bellies ten by ten, each group descending the ramps that led to the boulevard and curving off towards the Rhinos and Razorbacks waiting nearby. To a man they had their helmets mag-clamped to their waists, the warm column of pollution that whistled down the boulevard pulling at their topknots and ruffling the fur worn by their sergeants. It had no true soul to it, Agrellan's air, a toxic hivewind that an unaugmented human could not breathe without risking severe damage. But to the enhanced warriors of the White Scars it was still better than nothing. The baring of heads in a warzone was a lapse of protocol that the khan was apt to forgive, especially after being trapped for hours in the dimly-lit womb of a Thunderhawk.

Three groups of heavily-built, squat-bodied Space Marine bikes growled in readiness nearby, prime examples of the mechanical steeds so beloved by the sons of Chogoris. Several attack bikes were being tended nearby, their suspension blocks cleaned with psalms of purity and jets of compressed air.

Their riders tested the throttles, as much for the love of the noise as for any real assessment of the engine.

Emerging from the gun district to the west were loose, skirmishing mobs of Catachans, rebreather masks covering their mouths and lasguns held loosely at their sides. Rugged tanks fanned out in their wake.

To the khan, these were Imperial Guardsman only in the loosest sense. The planet Catachan was a violent mother, and she raised a different breed of man. No pomp and circumstance here, no ranks, no fanfares. Some said no discipline, either. Just hard-bitten, physically powerful men raised on a jungle world so deadly that even a White Scar would struggle to survive there for long.

The khan strode towards the bikes, sketching a loose salute towards Veteran Sergeant Djubali as he closed in. The sergeant saluted back, an easy grin spreading across his hairy face.

‘Straken’s taking his own good time getting into position,’ muttered the khan.

‘At least Terryn has deployed,’ Djubali replied. ‘Slow but sure, I suppose.’

The khan looked over to the war machines of House Terryn standing stock still at the end of the boulevard. To a casual glance they looked like the last six statues in a procession of armoured Imperial heroes that led from Gate Victorious to the slums of the hive’s core.

‘Straken’s Catachans are worth the wait, I hear,’ said Djubali. ‘Redstone’s too. Even if they are, you know. Human.’

The steedmaster shook his thick mane of hair as if shivering, brushing it from his face with a practiced sweep of his hand. It didn’t make much difference. The man had a beard that crept up almost to his eyelids.

‘I’m not certain the jungle fighters will be in position when the tau arrive, horseborn,’ said Kor’sarro. ‘Come to that, I’m not convinced Tybalt’s Knights will be, either.’

‘When the eagle carries the tortoise,’ said Djubali dolefully, ‘both go hungry.’

The khan nodded sagely. There was a shout from behind, and the clank of power-armoured feet on rockcrete. The khan frowned, turning in his tracks to see Sudabeh striding up to them.

‘My khan,’ the Stormseer began, consternation scored upon his weather-beaten features. ‘Hive command’s astropathic choir has received a message-psalm intended for the Third Company. It is a psychic communion, from Chogoris.’

‘Speak on,’ said the khan, his brow furrowed.

‘We are needed elsewhere, captain,’ breathed Sudabeh. ‘The message-psalm says that a heretic fleet, red as blood, has translated from the warp above Chogoris. It isn’t alone. The battlefleet is...’ The Stormseer shook his head as if

trying to dislodge a painful memory. ‘We must return to Quan Zhou at the first opportunity.’

The three men stood facing each other, their eyes sharing unspoken thoughts.

The khan was the first to speak. ‘We can’t,’ he said.

‘Our Chapter is in danger,’ said Sudabeh, ‘I consulted the Tarot as soon as I received the astropathic psalm. It indicates the Heretic Ascendant over the Brotherhood of the Storm.’

‘Not good news, I’ll wager,’ said Kor’sarro, grimly.

‘No, my khan. It... it shows the Tor Mortalis as the sole majoris. Destruction incumbent.’

‘Emperor’s bones,’ grimaced Kor’sarro. ‘So we’ll make it quick here, and translate back into the warp as soon as possible. The tau are all over this planet like flies on a carcass, but we can’t leave Agrellan’s people to die – or worse, to be turned against the Imperium by snake-tongued xenos.’

‘Besides, we’ve barely given them a bloody nose,’ said Djubali. ‘I say we close them down with blades and bolts, fight them face to face.’

‘You’ll forgive me if I don’t take your counsel as objective, horseborn,’ said the Stormseer, lips curled. ‘I can smell your anticipation from here.’

‘I don’t doubt it,’ said Djubali, his eyes twinkling behind the curtain of his hair. ‘My khan? What does your instinct tell you?’

‘We stay,’ said Kor’sarro. ‘And we hit the tau so hard they never come back.’

Circled by Draï’s stealth team, Shadowsun and her drones touched down in the white forest that girdled the peak south of Agrellan Prime. With her suit’s self-healing resins already hardening, she had left the repair protocols to themselves and funnelled power back to her suit functions. In the process she had announced her arrival at the muster point and called the coalition’s heavy elements to blip their position. A constellation of symbols pulsed gold amongst the swathe of desiccated woodland that spread across her topographical display. At its heart was the symbol denoting the metropolis the humans called Agrellan Prime. Over five kilometres in height, the spear-tipped triangle was so tall its spires were lost to the clouds of pollution fanning out from the innumerable chimneys studding its thick bulk.

Shadowsun took stock of her situation, linking into Oe-ken-yon’s datacompile as her underclaw punch-cylinders took stratified samples of the ground beneath. Less than a second later new information spooled across her sensor suite.

The soil was completely sterile. There were no life forms at all within the forest’s borders.

She reached out to touch a jagged stump, and it crumbled under her fingers,

leaving a fine white powder. Whatever had killed this planet prior to its resettlement had done a terrifyingly thorough job.

The glitches whispered in, louder in the forest than out on the scorched earth of the plain. Some of the sound waves looked a lot like words. Shadowsun's right eye hovered over the autotrans field, its fat golden bar awaiting her blink.

She thought of Traitor Shoh looking down at her, his face a blur in the darkness, gently admonishing her for talking of ghosts in the night.

She knelt, muted all audio save emergency channels, and blink-pushed the autotrans.

The words hissed and crackled as if coming from a very great distance, but they were words, there was no doubt. They had meaning. The autotrans ran its conclusions underneath each sound wave, the fragments that it could isolate and decipher causing Shadowsun to frown in confusion.

' - - - DEATH - - - ONLY DEATH - - - SHOULD NOT HAVE COME HERE - - - YOU WILL FAIL - - - YOU SHALL FALL - - - JOIN US - - - JOIN WITH THE DUST - - - KEEP YOU IN THE NOTHINGNESS - - - '

Shadowsun blipped off the audiostream, cancelled the autotrans and stood up straight. The urge to fight, to kill, rose in her chest.

'All forward teams to begin bombardment immediately,' she transmitted across the cadre.

A series of icons blipped gold in readiness, though a few still bore the dull silver of incompleteness.

'Commander, this is Tank Veteran Shas'ui Lir, we are six minutes from the nearest gold zone.' Another voice was queued close behind. 'Commander Shadowsun, Shas'ui Domor reporting, gold in eight minutes estimate.'

'Begin bombardment as soon as you reach range, Shas'ui Lir,' she transmitted, sketching a direct line of approach on the shared command grid. 'Domor, stand by in silver zone with the rapid insertion forces and await further commands. The Imperials have as yet undefined assets of their own behind those walls.'

'Affirmed, commander.'

The forest filled with the whip-cracks of Hammerhead gunships opening fire as the tau began their persecution of the towering metropolis. Broadside battlesuits raised their own railguns in a rifleman's stance, each giant ochre warrior tall enough to fire over the open canopies of the Piranha skimmers that hovered nearby.

As one the Broadside locked, piston-fired, and fired. Streaking shafts of air connected them to the hive's weakest points for a split second, the dull thwack of impact reaching Shadowsun a moment later. Seeker missiles zoomed out from the Skyrays behind her, flying parallel to the cylinder of displaced air left by

each rail rifle shot. The missiles altered their trajectory at the last moment to hammer into fault lines, sending tumbling sheets of ornamental stone into the hivers scurrying below.

‘Repeat protocols,’ said Shadowsun. ‘Remain at full alert. I doubt it will take long for those gates to open.’

Less than a minute of punitive bombardment later, the blare of klaxons rang out into the gloom. Autolanterns bathed the superhighway with pools of light. The enormous wall of metal-ridged ferrocrete that guarded Agrellan Prime’s main entrance slid upwards, a portcullis clanking open to allow its castle’s defenders to sally forth.

Shadowsun’s gunships were already making their attack run. Sleek but wide in the manner of undersea glider-beasts, her Tigersharks had wingspans to rival those of the gue’ron’sha’s indomitable gunships. Their chin-mounted ion cannons spat pulses of bluish energy that hurtled under the opening gate, blasting low into whatever was waiting to emerge on the other side. Upon impact a great sheet of white light flashed out with a deafening clap of displaced air. A heartbeat later a cloud of dust was thrown up, confusing the vid-feeds of the tau waiting in the desiccated forest.

‘Reveal yourself,’ muttered Shadowsun. Preoccupied and more than a little disturbed by the autotrans spool, she had inadvertently transmitted her exhalation across the cadrenet’s open frequency. Next to her, Shas’vre Drai blipped the symbol of mild confusion to his teammates.

Shadowsun projected her sensor suite’s vid-feed through a gap in the white trunks of the forest, seeking to make out the wreckage of whatever her Tigershark squadron’s ion cannons had engaged under the gate. The markerlights of her ranged support cadre’s pathfinder teams flickered across her vid-feed, their ruby red lines seeking purchase in the billowing dust.

Increasing magnification once more, Shadowsun thought she could make out hunchbacked warriors moving in the dust. She zoomed back out again, thinking for a moment she had originally pushed the magnification too far.

In the lower quadrant of her sensor suite, the whisper-hiss changed shape, its wavelengths become less like words and more like laughter.

Then the gate slid up to reveal the metallic goliaths of House Terryn.

During the subtle conquest of the Damocles Gulf that had led to the war on Agrellan, the ambassadors of the water caste had found that there was one rock they could not erode. Many of the human worlds at the fringes of that impassable abyss had become bitter and disillusioned by the relentless grind of Imperial rule, and they were easily swayed by the promises of a better future.

Even Agrellan had been infected by their insidious statecraft.

Yet the Knight world of Voltoris stood firm.

No matter how much the water caste bargained and explained and manoeuvred during their audience at Furion Peak, the seeds of their subtle conquests fell on barren ground. Patriarch Tybalt of House Terryn was too old, too mean and too suspicious to fall for the courting of xenos diplomats, and he told the tau ambassadors as much to their faces. Tybalt saw the offer of peaceful and mutually beneficial integration into the tau empire for what it was – a veiled choice between assimilation and destruction.

The patriarch banished the ambassadors from his keep on pain of death, roaring an oath to destroy the tau should they ever threaten a sovereign world of the Imperium.

And Tybalt, for all his many faults, was a man of his word.

The powerfully built walkers emerging from the hive gate were living monuments to the blunt power of mankind. Each was a colossus to rival the dreams of the most ambitious earth caste visionary, a stamping, killing relic that epitomised mankind's unsubtle approach to war. Out from the dust surrounding Gate Victorious came six of the giant machines. They were resplendent in regal blue, a white horsehead icon glowing under the pooling light of the gate's lanterns.

So impressive were they, so mighty in aspect, that not even Shadowsun noticed the white-armoured bikes roaring through the dust clouds between their legs.

Effigies of crude iron and grease-slicked pistons, the Knights' riveted limbs were pillars of emblazoned alloy. They were constructed as bipeds, as if the dull machine-smiths of humanity had once witnessed the glory of a tau battlesuit and built flightless effigies in much the same fashion, but far, far larger. Their arms were massive weapon systems that swivelled beneath wide carapaces that were painted with heraldic designs. Yellow lenses glowed behind the eye-slits of featureless helms. As they came forward, long saw-toothed swords blurred through the air in slashing arcs. Each titanic blade looked more than capable of tearing a Hammerhead gunship to mangled scrap.

Shadowsun had no desire to see them put to use.

'All units operative at current range, neutralise them immediately,' she transmitted. 'Closest targets first, sequential reach.'

Even before the commander had finished her orders, the Hammerhead gunships at the edge of the desiccated forest punched railgun fire into the leading walkers. Shadowsun had expected the hypervelocity ammunition to smash right

through the ancient relics, but the volleys merely flared white a few metres before they struck their targets, atomised by convex shields of force.

As the red-dot markerlights of their diminutive pathfinder comrades picked out eye sockets and hip joints, the Broadside battlesuits of Shadowsun's ranged support cadre added their own firepower. More railguns fired, and more solid shot ammunition was burnt to atoms before it could strike home.

On the Knights came, closing the distance with every swinging stride.

The Tigersharks had banked around for another attack, looping perpendicular to the ground before firing a stream of ionic energy spheres into the Knights. The blue-white bursts fizzled into nothingness upon each walker's shields, strobing pulses that lit the night but nothing more.

Then, with a blare of war-klaxons loud enough to wake the damned, the Knights of House Terryn broke into a run.

Kor'sarro Khan's lips drew back into a grinning snarl as Moondrakkan reached full throttle. The cursed xenos were so preoccupied by Tybalt's stamping, blaring distractions that they had missed three whole squads of bikes roaring out into the gloom. They would live to regret their mistake. But not for long.

The khan gunned the engines as he took the lead of the triple arrowhead of bikes. He could hear the throaty roar of Djubali's customised steed, Vendrujin, not far behind. Kor'sarro's blood pounded in his ears, the thrill of the chase filling him with electric energy. These xenos thought themselves so clever, skulking in that poor excuse for a forest. Yet every time the cylinder-shot of their heavy munitions hurtled across the plains, it left a brief trail in the air that led back to its source. They may be able to hide from Agrellan Prime's guns, thought Kor'sarro, but he would be damned before they could hide from the wrath of the White Scars.

Behind them, House Terryn's Knights had doubled their pace. Through the vibrations of Moondrakkan's wheels, the khan could feel the hard-packed wastes shiver with their loping tread. He chuckled to himself inside his helmet at the thought of the xenos reaction to the monstrous Imperial Knights. They would not have been expecting their appearance, let alone their headlong charge. The Knights were smaller than the Titans of the Mechanicus, but by the Great Khan, they were a damn sight faster. He wouldn't mind trying the helm of one of those things himself, one day.

As the White Scars arrowed around the tau's flank one of the Knights went down, its knee buckling. With a protesting creak it crashed headlong into the dust. It had been sniped by a xenos battlesuit, by the look of the fire-trace. To its pilot's credit, even when sprawled in the dust the Knight hammered shell after

shell into the desiccated forest, stabbing blind at its persecutors out of spite. Its brother Knights opened up in support, laying down a fusillade of large-bore shells in a barrage that any tank company would be proud of.

Kor'sarro and his men hurtled around the thick waist of the desiccated forest, scanning for the foe and taking the measure of the battle as it unfolded. In their wake the foremost Knights levelled their thermal cannons. Each mighty gun's barrels glowed cherry red, then amber, then unbearably bright white. As one the Knights unleashed six blinding spears of energy into the tau skimmer-tanks lurking in the forest. Everything the beams touched, everything even close by, was annihilated in a single searing moment. The tanks disappeared completely, simply erased from existence by the sheer power of the Knights' weapons.

Despite their lethal salvo, the walkers themselves had not slowed their charge. They crashed into the forest with the force of industrial wrecking balls. Jagged tree stumps were smashed to powder wherever their thick legs swung, fine white dust coating their heraldic colours up to the waist. Ion shields flashed as they were struck by a hundred projectiles and pulse bursts at once. Before even one could be taken down, the Knights of House Terryn fell upon the skimmer-tanks that had been trapped by their own close deployment. Reaper chainswords growled and juddered as they carved left and right, the chewed-up remnants of xenos skimmers flung far and wide. The khan's eyes crinkled in approval. Nothing could mangle a tank quite like a reaper.

With a great shout, the khan led his own charge into the forest. He stood up slightly in the saddle as he rode, jinking the bike around the desiccated stumps with twists of his hips as he scanned for xenos to kill. A pocket of shimmering dust appeared up ahead, a will-o'-the-wisp that would have been easy to miss. The khan squeezed Moondrakkan's trigger bar and sent a volley of hand-engraved bolter shells streaking through the forest. He was rewarded by scarlet blossoms of blood and a chorus of thin shrieks that could only have come from alien throats.

Djubali raced past him, hammering up the sloping wreckage of an alien tank and launching off the other side. Mid-flight, the White Scar twisted his hips and brought his bike's rear wheel round so the whole vehicle flew sidelong. He barked a war cry as the heavy vehicle slammed through a slender trunk and ploughed right into a knot of kneeling tau snipers with blunt, crushing force. Djubali rode out the skid, revved his engine amidst a confusion of powdered stone and broken alien limbs. A couple of bolt pistol shots boomed as the veteran executed those victims he had not killed on impact.

The khan blew out his cheeks, squeezing off another slew of bolt shells as he jinked left and right through the trees. Suddenly a trio of giant alien battlesuits

loomed up ahead, and he drew the sword Moonfang crackling from its scabbard. Kor'sarro lopped the weapon-arm from the nearest battlesuit, sliding his bike low under the spitting plasma of the second before shoulder barging the last of them through a tree.

The first battlesuit recovered quickly from the shock of its lost limb, boosting away from the khan on twin trails of fire. Missiles popped from its shoulder launcher and lanced out towards him. Instinct took over, and Kor'sarro leant over fully into the lee of his hurtling bike, just as the tribal riders of Chogoris used their steeds as shields against the arrows of their rivals. Letting the machine's armoured bulk take the brunt of the explosion, he grabbed a krak grenade from his stowage rack and tore the pin out with blood-slicked teeth. Moondrakkan's back wheel swung out wide as the khan flung the grenade high. Its detonation snapped a blinding burst right in front of the airborne battlesuit, ensuring his escape.

Up ahead his men were engaged with the enemy. Some fired searing bursts of plasma into the rifleman battlesuits that were hammering solid shot into the rampaging Knights. Their shots tore great holes that fizzed with electric malfunction. Others swung chainswords and power swords at the skulking tau infantrymen shimmering in the trees, arcs of blood splashing red across the white tree trunks.

Up ahead and to the right, a hovering skimmer tank loosed salvo after salvo of missiles at a Knight struggling to dislodge a wrecked battlesuit from its whirring chainblade. Djubali cut right across the khan's path, sliding his bike sidelong into a wheels-first skid that was all but horizontal. Rider and bike passed right beneath the tank's anti-grav field in a cloud of stone dust, emerging unscathed before righting and speeding off again. Kor'sarro mentally counted down – three, two, one. Right on cue, the sergeant's krak grenades detonated with a deafening crump, flipping the tank over onto its missile turret.

The tight formations that the tau had adopted, coordinated to avoid the big guns of the hive, were proving to be their downfall. The White Scars and their allies in House Terryn sowed mayhem in every quarter. The air filled with the acrid stink of burning circuitry, the stench of molten plastics and the tang of alien blood. The khan gave a great shout of exultation as he took the head from a fleeing tau infantryman. His war cry was echoed by his Chogorian brethren as they killed their way through the forest acre by acre.

Through the vibrations of Moondrakkan's handlebars, the khan could feel his response force closing in. The bass rumble of his Rhino and Razorback transports was underscored by the trundling thunder of the Catachan armoured division.

The battle was as good as won.

‘Targets sighted,’ transmitted Shadowsun. ‘Switch to multispectral and pick them out. Bait units, leave the walkers for now. Avoidance tactics only.’

Assent signals blipped across her command suite as her assault cadre closed in. The humans had struck hard, as was their custom. Predictable to the last, they were more concerned with the power of the deed than the thought behind it. Six bipedal war engines – five now, she corrected herself – and half a company of Space Marines. Fierce enough foes, but no match for multiple cadres of the fire caste’s finest.

Close behind her was the Crisis bodyguard team that Aun’va had assigned her. All five of them were proven heroes in their own right, chosen for those occasions when concentrated force was needed more than subtlety and stealth. This was one of those times. Engaging their blacksun filters to pick out their prey from the clouds of wood-powder, the airborne battlesuits sent streams of plasma hissing down into the gue’ron’sha bikers. They incinerated a Space Marine or cored a bike with every shot.

‘Air support, occupy those walkers. All bait units to immediately embark and rise, maximum elevation. They’ve revealed their strength, now we rob them of it. Crisis team, with me. We have monsters to hunt.’

Hidden by the clouds of white powder that the Imperial assault had thrown up from the desiccated forest, the surviving tau infantry mounted up into their Devilfish transports as fast as they could. The giants in their midst fought on, their stamping feet claiming the odd drone and crushing wrecked tanks into scrap. Shadowsun’s assault cadre closed in, announcing their presence with volleys of missiles and ion streams.

The Imperial walkers turned to face the new threat, and the decimated bait cadre took its chance. By twos and threes the skimmer tanks began to hover upwards until they were out of reach even for Terryn’s Knights. Before a minute had passed, not a single tau remained earthbound. The Space Marine bikers and the vehicle-borne reinforcements roaring towards their position threw a smattering of fire into the air, and though the odd Piranha recon skimmer or light battlesuit fell smoking back to earth, it was not enough to prevent the cadres rallying and forming up above them once more.

By withdrawing into the skies, the tau had effectively turned the tables on their foes. Shadowsun’s battlesuits arced through the dust-choked air until they were directly above the giant walkers, sending tight beams of plasma and fusion blaster fire into their emblazoned carapaces. The hatch atop one of the giant walkers popped open under the buckling heat that washed across it. Shadowsun

landed deftly atop the walker's broad back, pushing the muzzle of her own blaster into the cockpit and consuming the pilot in a blast of blinding light and molten metal.

One by one, the four surviving Imperial war engines turned and stomped back towards the hive. The roar of bike engines dwindled in the forest, impossible to pinpoint in the white mist that fogged it from end to end.

'No pursuit,' transmitted Shadowsun. 'All cadres, do not pursue. Stay in gold zones only. You may fire at will.'

The walkers made their way back to the Gate Victorious, sullen giants denied a promised feast. The tau levelled as much fire at them as they could, but the walkers' convex force fields now protected their riveted backs. The great gate of Agrellan Prime slid upwards once more, allowing the walkers to stamp their way back inside.

In the shelter of the forest, Shadowsun checked her image banks and replayed a sample clip of the battle they had witnessed. The Imperial forces had taken a heavy toll on the bait cadre, but the way of the Patient Hunter required sacrifice, and the tau did not begrudge lives spent to ensure victory.

By luring the human armies to reveal their most potent assets, the tau had taken the measure of their foe, and would be all the more lethal when next they crossed swords.

The great kill was so close Shadowsun could almost taste it.

The khan stormed into the vaulted hall, his ceramite boots clacking loud against ancient flagstones. The shafts of light that angled from the stained glass wall-slits played across gore-spattered battleplate as he strode forward. A clutch of decapitated tau heads bounced at his waist, bound through the eye sockets by a hemp rope that was already stiff with dried blood. At his side were Djubali and Sudabeh, their faces masks of white powder streaked with sweat.

The low hum of conversation in the vault ebbed away at the arrhythmic thud of their approach. It died altogether as the khan tossed a high-backed datathrone out of his path and loomed over the assembled delegates. He slammed his armoured knuckles onto the round oval table at the vault's heart, and all but two of the dignitaries seated around it flinched backwards as if stung.

'Where in the warp's darkest hole were you?' he growled at the assembly.

'Huh. You Chogorians love a dramatic entrance, don't you,' drawled a tough-looking officer in the military vest and loose fatigues of a Catachan jungle fighter. The khan met his gaze, evaluating him in a single glance. A born warrior, and a veteran at that. One eye was hooded and unafraid, the other a bionic replacement that glowed dully in the gloom. Below the neck a knotted mass of

muscle and tendon met extensive cybernetics that would have done a pit slave proud.

‘You test me, Catachan,’ said the khan, his teeth gritted hard. ‘Your regiment failed to make an entrance at all.’

‘You go racing off after glory and medals, there isn’t much chance us mere mortals are going to keep up,’ chuckled the officer, swinging his boots up onto the table and leaning back in the throne. He took a greasy lho-stick from behind a cauliflower ear and struck a match on the triumphal mosaic at the table’s edge. The stench of Catachan tobaccine filled the air.

Fuming at the human’s tone, the khan strode around the long table towards the officer. As he bore down on the Catachan, an old man in a fur-collared greatcoat pushed his datathrone backward into Kor’sarro’s path. He reached up to lay a gloved hand on the gold eagle of the khan’s breastplate.

‘Captain Khan of the White Scars Chapter,’ he said. ‘Remember that we are your allies.’

‘Remove your hand, Patriarch Tybalt, or Moonfang shall remove it for you,’ said the khan, his voice the rumble of an oncoming storm.

‘Be not so hasty,’ admonished the white-haired elder, his strangely goat-like face twisted into something he presumably believed was a smile. ‘The tau would like nothing more than for our armour to be riven from within. We are here to deny them their prize, not to serve it to them on a silver platter. Please sit.’

‘I will not “sit”,’ the khan spat, making the very idea sound like the gravest of sins. ‘But you at least fought well, Tybalt. As you committed your strength alongside ours, I will listen to you as an equal. Perhaps you can explain your insubordinate friend’s failure to deploy.’

The patriarch’s face turned sour as month-old cream. ‘Colonel Straken is no friend of mine,’ he said, casting a glance at his opposite number.

The Catachan officer leered over at them both, tobacco-stained teeth yellow in the gloom. ‘You better find some patience, Space Marine,’ said the jungle fighter, pointing a metallic finger at the khan. ‘You can’t win this one by speed and brute force. They’re tau, the Damocles lot. Sure, they aren’t as fast as the eldar, but they are likely faster than you. Even on those lumpy battering rams you call bikes.’

The khan’s nostrils flared wide, his breastplate rising and falling as a hot coal of anger burnt in his chest. Tybalt met his gaze out of the corner of his eye, and gave Kor’sarro an almost imperceptible shake of his head.

‘They’re beyond caring about ground taken, and there’s no way they’re dumb enough to try a frontal assault,’ continued Straken. ‘They aren’t idiot orks, or maniac zealots neither. They only care about the long game, this lot, and they’ll

pull any trick they can to win it. Even then, they'll happily die like fish if they think it'll do their mates back home a favour.'

The khan turned the full force of his glare upon the Catachan, his hand on the hilt of his sword. 'You will address me with the proper respect, colonel,' he said, his voice as cold as steel in the dark, 'or you will not speak at all. I promise you that.'

The Catachan took a long drag on his lho-stick before stubbing it out on the priceless Pluvian marble of the vault's table.

'Yeah, yeah. Like I said, you aren't even waging the same war as this lot. They'll run rings around you if you keep fighting them on their terms, nipping at the bait like a starving rippyfish. I know a good ambush tactic when I see one.'

The Catachan's tone was blunt but genuine, and the khan found his anger cool.

'Perhaps you are right,' admitted the khan. 'Patriarch Tybalt, where do you and your Knights stand on this matter? You fought against the tau on Voltoris, I believe?'

'I fought them with words, not blades, I'm afraid,' said the patriarch archly. 'Today was the first time House Terryn has jousted with them on the field. These tau have formidable ranged capabilities, perhaps formidable enough to pierce our shields in a prolonged engagement. But they lack courage, and bladesmanship to boot.'

'Yes,' said the khan. 'It's the mind behind those weapons that is their deadliest weapon.'

'Any idea who that might be, then?' said Colonel Straken, the knotted scar tissue of his one remaining eyebrow raised high.

'I have indeed,' replied Kor'sarro. 'My blade would have already taken her head if it weren't for her xenos techno-heresy.'

'Hmm,' mused Tybalt. 'A female, then.'

'I believe so, by the way she moves,' said the khan. 'She wears a warsuit that can cast her invisible, though it is compromised by high speeds. She is adept in the use of melta-class guns, but has not might enough to fell our Thunderhawks. It was her that burnt your fellow noble in his command throne, Patriarch Tybalt.'

'I saw only an ethereal shimmer before Gensen met the Emperor,' said Tybalt, his eyes downcast. 'But nonetheless I saw something atop his carapace. Was that her?'

'She was there all right,' said the khan, striding over to the stained glass window. 'Her thermal signature was baffled, some xenos illusion hid her from sight, but it was her. I recognised the weapon discharge. If we are to win this war, she must die.'

‘Emperor help you with that, then,’ said Straken, flexing the fingers of his cybernetic arm. ‘She’ll be well out of it by now. Cautious lot, these grey-skins. I’ve got no air transport under my command, and we just found out the hard way that my Chimeras can’t reach her on the open plain. My lads’ll either have to lay a trap or chase ghosts for the rest of the war, and there’s enough of them crowding the vox-net as it is. A frontal assault just isn’t going to work a second time, even if Tybalt’s fancy walkers did give ’em a nasty surprise back there. Might as well try to run down the wind.’

‘You may be right,’ admitted the patriarch, stroking the tuft of white hair on his chin. ‘A foe borne on invisible wings, no matter how weak of limb he might be, finds it easy to stay out of blade’s reach.’

‘Set your traps, then,’ sneered the khan. ‘Wage your slow and costly war. I shall be waging mine on the open plain, as my primarch intended.’

The captain looked out through the stained glass wall-slit, peering at the wasteland below with his jaw set firm. The flat landscape reminded him of his home world, Chogoris. A beautiful planet of stark wilderness and endless skies, where his brothers were likely giving their lives in battle even now. Where old friends were bleeding out and dying with each passing minute.

Yet the khan had a duty to perform before he could return. He would not abandon it, not this side of the grave.

‘I’m coming for you, you xenos witch,’ he said to the world outside. ‘Surround yourself with the greatest warriors at your command, or cower in the deepest and darkest hole you can find. It matters not. I shall take your head, for the Great Khan and for the Emperor.’

With her cadre hidden in the lee of a wasteland mesa, Shadowsun had taken a moment’s meditation in the midst of some shadowed boulders. Her drones keeping lookout, she played back the footage she had taken from the battle outside Agrellan Prime. At first she examined the giant walkers, paying particular attention to the perimeters of their force shields. Brutish things, powerful engines of destruction indeed but easily circumvented if necessary. Not so the speeding white bikers that had assailed them in the forest. They had a shocking turn of speed and the bravery to capitalise upon it. One mistake against this new breed of gue’ron’sha could be fatal.

‘ - - - FATAL - - - FATAL - - - THEY SHALL BRING YOU PAIN - - - ’

There it was again, the whisper-hiss, somehow overriding the mute she had assigned it. Her back went ramrod straight as she realised the whispers had somehow responded to her thoughts. Was that even possible?

‘DEATH - - - DEATH - - - THE GRAVE OPENS FOR YOU - - - ’

SHASERRA - - - LIE WITH US IN THE DUST - - -'

'Commander!'

Shadowsun's jetpack engaged as she spun around in an aerial pirouette, all three drones whipping in close. Her fusion blasters gave a rising whine.

'For the love of the Greater Good, Draï,' she huffed, downpowering her guns. 'Blip me first, or next time I'll put a hole in you.'

'I am greatly contrite, my commander,' said Shas'vre Draï. A deactivation wave crackled across his battlesuit as his truelight appearance was slowly revealed.

'I assume there is some report you needed to make in person,' said Shadowsun, 'or did you disturb my meditations purely to remind me that you have no sense of timing?'

'There are... developments, my commander.'

'Go on.'

'During active reconnaissance, my optimised stealth group... we located the gue'ron'sha outside one of the principal dwelling-peaks. It appears they had searched the metropolis they designated as "Hive City", hoping to neutralise the water caste operative within. Once they had emerged and revealed their presence by destroying the kroot salvage operation outside Agrellan Prime, we were able to get close enough to hear them talk of their plans.'

'Excellent,' said Shadowsun. 'Transmit them immediately.'

Shas'vre Draï paused for a second before continuing. 'Of course, my commander. In summary, they have determined you to be the primary threat. They intend to locate you and neutralise you via the means of decapitation.'

Nearby Oe-hei and Oe-nu buzzed in alarm, circling each other in agitation.

'I see,' said Shadowsun. 'Yes, I imagine death by decapitation would affect my ability to prosecute the war.'

'Be assured I will not allow this to occur, my commander. My life is your shield.'

'That is kind, Shas'vre Draï. Yet it seems the most efficient way to force these gue'ron'sha into committing a fatal mistake would be to offer myself as bait.'

'I... I cannot allow that, my commander,' replied Draï. 'I shall go in your stead.'

'You and I shall do exactly what the tau empire requires of us, Shas'vre,' said Shadowsun, her tone authoritarian. 'Even if it means killing everything we can find, or the demise of every tau life on the planet.'

'Of course, my commander,' replied Draï, chastened. 'For the Greater Good.'

Those tau with advanced sensor suites heard it first, a distant roar that shook fine

black shale from the high ridge above. Two dots appeared on the horizon, closing fast.

‘Enact,’ transmitted Commander Shadowsun. In the shadow of the ridge behind her, a squadron of Sun Shark bombers took off into the air.

The white-hulled Thunderhawk gunships of the gue’ron’sha arrowed towards their position at breakneck pace, each trailed by smaller escort craft. Shadowsun had predicted their presence – indeed, made herself a visible target in order to invite it. For all the ridiculous superstition and ritual that bound the Imperium’s earth caste equivalent, they were clearly capable enough to effect complex repairs. The gunship with the ridiculously long barrel atop it should not have been flight capable at all.

Something churned in her chest, a desire to see the great engines brought low and smashed to pieces in the dust. She frowned, confusion bleeding into the cold certainty of her battle plan. Such emotion before an engagement was... untoward.

‘- - - KILL - - - KILL THEM ALL - - - BATHE IN THEIR BLOOD - - -’ spooled the autotrans.

She shuddered, aware of her skin brushing the inside of her battlesuit as the words rang around her head. She blink-pushed the translation ware off, but the strangely compelling whispers remained at the forefront of her thoughts. Perhaps it was because there was a part of her that wished to resolve things in as quick and as deadly a fashion as possible. Maybe that was how it felt before the initiation of a Mont’ka strategy. Perhaps... perhaps that was how the Traitor Shoh felt inside, all the time.

Shadowsun did understand – intellectually, at least – that the raw aggression and pitiless violence of the Mont’ka had its uses. But of the two macrostrategies, the Kauyon was unquestionably the most efficient way. She would prove it here, as the enemy gunships roared into the jaws of her trap. Just as she always did.

The enemy gunships were seconds away now, at most. Out from the blind edge of the giant ridge where they had exposed their position came two squadrons of Sun Shark bombers, their elegant tan hulls flying with the sun behind their tails. Paradox squadrons, their underslung bomb arrays fitted not with the plasma-based pulse bombs standard to their kind, but unstable stasis fields that could introduce a glitch into the timestream itself. Dangerous, thought Shadowsun, but extremely effective.

The Imperial gunships loosed a salvo of missiles towards the tau out in the open, the dull thump of detonations blasting Crisis battlesuits across the wastes in showers of black shale. Intent on their prey on the plain beneath the ridge, the gunships did not notice the Paradox squadrons converging on their position.

Shadowsun watched intently as her bombers cut an intercept course, dropping localised stasis anomalies towards the enemy craft.

There was a flare of eye-watering unlight for a second, and the fabric of space-time bulged around the Imperial gunships. For a second the giant aircraft froze, the angry bellow of their engines stuttering in and out of existence. Then, as the bubble of time that had encapsulated them popped, all four of the aircraft roared over the top of the ridge, missing it by metres and ploughing nose-first into the hard, cracked earth.

Her blood pulsing with excitement, Shadowsun boosted upward to see the destruction her trap had wrought. A dozen battlesuits and a score of drones escorted her, hovering forward with all weapons systems primed.

The Thunderhawks lay at the end of the two great furrows they had ploughed in the earth. Their fuselages jutted at awkward angles, wings torn from their frames and fires licking across their thick hulls.

‘Circle to the front, a hundred metres berth at all times,’ transmitted Shadowsun. ‘If anything somehow staggers out of there, I want it dead before it has taken two paces towards us.’

Golden signals of assent blipped across her command suite, the deadliest weaponry in the cadre’s arsenal primed and ready for the kill.

As Shadowsun completed the half-circle that brought her to the front of the Thunderhawks, she heard a dull hiss. A white-edged circle glowed wide in the middle of the giant jaws jutting from the front of each gunship, reducing the mighty drawbridges to molten rain.

There was a throaty growl of bike engines followed by a whooping, ululating war cry. Bolters blazing, their blades and their voices raised, the steedmasters of Chogoris roared out from the darkness and plunged into the tau lines.

Bare-headed, bloodied and bruised, the White Scars hurtled out of the *Spear’s* melta-cut door. Kor’sarro Khan himself led the charge, with his champions Jebe Sabrehand and Djubali Steedborn gunning their steeds’ engines in his wake. Each of the three warriors had a glowing powerblade clutched in one fist and his bike’s handlebar triggers in the other. Staccato bursts of muzzle flare lit their swarthy features from below, each battle-brother snarling or shouting as he channelled the war-lust in his soul.

Behind the trio of leaders came paired squadrons of armoured bikes, two abreast and slewing out fast to open fire with their front-mounted bolters. As they clanked over the fallen jaws of the Thunderhawk, the side doors of the gunship clanged open. More white-armoured Space Marines piled out to add their bolter fire to the fusillade.

The khan could clearly see the xenos cowards that had shot them down. They were maybe two hundred metres away at most, a loose circle of large bipedal warsuits already pulsing plasma at their position. Most of their shots went wide or scorched shale, though a few sizzled into fairings and reinforced wheels. Kor'sarro's feral smile grew wide. The tau were clearly ill-prepared for a mounted charge, whereas the White Scars were experts at the art of the sudden attack, turning each stolen second into a lethal advantage.

The khan quickly scanned the undulating hillocks and ridges ahead, teeth grinding in anticipation of the beheading to come. Sure enough the xenos witch was there, bracketed by bodyguards and drones. Her snow-white armour was already shimmering to blend with the dark shale underfoot. Kor'sarro gunned the throttle and accelerated towards her, hungry to part her head from her neck.

The volley of firepower from the circle of ochre battlesuits was thickening as the White Scars closed in. Long-barrelled rifles sent thin lozenges of plasma sizzling in the khan's direction, and the captain ducked down low. A second later his flaring nostrils picked out the stink of scorched hair over the ferroplastic tang of burning bike. His helmet display flicked up two, three, four mortis-runes from the squad behind. No time to look. No time to do anything but charge.

Those coming in fast behind them veered serpent-fast around the tumbling wrecks that had once been proud riders, plumes of shattered shale arcing up from the heavy rear wheels of their bikes. Ahead the tau battlesuits were rising up, the loose scree flattening in circles beneath them as their jetpacks boosted them higher. Their pulse weapons fired quadruple-burst volleys into the massed bikers, and though many blossomed ineffectually from thick ceramite plates, half a dozen kill shots hit home.

And the White Scars were amongst the foe.

The khan stood up in his saddle and brought Moonfang around in a high loop that severed the nearest warsuit's leg and cut away half of its crotch in a spray of green sparks. Behind him, Jebe couched his power spear against his pauldron and used the momentum of his charge to spit another warsuit through the chest. As the company champion rode underneath the alien warsuit, he twisted his body like a lancer rolling with the impact of a hit, yanking his spear free in a spurt of blood. The xenos machine's legs and weapon-arms dangled corpse-limp even as its jetpack kept it hovering three metres above the earth.

Djubali steered hard into a large flat stone and yanked hard on the handlebars to pull the nose of his bike high for a moment. At the apex of the jump his bolters blasted a double-shot into the jetpack of a warsuit turning to evade. Djubali's front wheel slammed back down into the shale and he veered off after the khan whilst the stricken warsuit pirouetted wildly downwards into the shale.

The red-helmeted Veteran Sergeant Koghai roared past, taking the fallen machine's head from its neck with his powered tulwar blade as he went.

And then, as the loose circle of battlesuits boosted further upward in the skies, the riders of Chogoris found themselves with nothing left to charge.

'Rally and re-engage!' shouted Shadowsun, her voice tight with tension.

'Vertical vectors wherever possible. Do not meet them on the horizontal plane!'

Golden signals of assent flicked on all but two of her subordinate registers. Shas've Tu'la Rin's vital signs had turned the charcoal grey of death, and Shas've De're La's gunmetal was fading quickly to ash. Still, if the rest of them kept their altitude high, no more tau lives need be lost to the gue'ron'sha's ugly but effective ambush.

The broken formation of her battlesuit cadre re-established its noose as it rose higher. Weapons systems spat fire into the heavy bikes that growled beneath them like a pride of angry hyperfelids. Those that roared out of the encirclement were met by streams of burst cannon fire from hidden stealth teams. The chameleonic shadows of Draï's battlesuits shimmered low as they cut down the escaping foe with clinical precision.

Shadowsun picked out the enemy commander at the edge of the pack, the same scarred giant that she had fought on the gunship's wing. The war-leader and his comrades had drawn blunt pistols and were firing explosive, rocket-propelled bolts towards them. The commander was shouting something up at her, pointing what looked like a long ceremonial sword in her direction. She spared a quick glimpse for the autotrans as it converted the gue'ron'sha's words into tau.

' - - - FACE ME YOU SKULKING HAG - - - ' his challenge read, ' - - - COME BACK AND FIGHT - - - HONOURLESS COWARD - - - '

Eye-flicking a top-down vector of attack, Shadowsun boosted in close, bracketed by her shield drones and the two closest Crisis battlesuits. As they approached, a gue'ron'sha riding next to the bellowing war-leader stood in his saddle and flung a long, spear-like weapon right at her. Warning lights flickered red inside her helmet, bip-bip-bipping in rising alarm. She twisted her hips to steer her jetpack's course left, curving around the spear's path so her shield drones did not have to intercept it with their spheres of protective force. Oe-nu transmitted a tiny thanks-symbol, his reservoir band still a healthy copper hue.

The spear-thrower carved his bike around, and her sensor suite linked the rider's projected route with the trajectory of his arcing weapon. Anticipating his course, she dropped suddenly and kicked him in the back of the head as he drove past, sending him careening into a shale-dune. The spear thudded down,

impaling its owner's shoulder and pinning him to the ground. The corners of her mouth twitched upward at the sight. She would enjoy replaying that moment once this was over.

The gue'ron'sha war-leader was coming around, looking right in her direction despite her stealth field. She levelled her fusion blasters and loosed parallel shots right at him. As the vaporising blasts hit his bike, the vehicle burst apart in an explosion of molten metal and steam. Somehow, though, the warrior had hurled himself free a matter of microseconds before the shot hit home.

The warrior rolled in a loose shoulder-curl, clattering to a gunman's kneel behind a smoking mass of human remains and firing a two-handed pistol shot right at Shadowsun's head. Warnings bipped once more, but this time Oe-nu intercepted with a timely shield-flare. The mass-reactive bolt detonated prematurely, and the explosion washed like fiery liquid across the dome of the drone's protective sphere. She blipped her own thanks-symbol, boosting back upward as her fusion blasters recharged with a high-pitched whine.

A rough wedge of the bikers were trying to blaze a path out of the hail of firepower that was cutting them down. By their vectors, they were hoping to reunite with their comrades back at the fallen gunships. More than a third of their number had fallen now, and white-armoured bodies lay sprawled amongst the burning wreckage of their armoured bikes. All across the ridge the gue'ron'sha were fighting desperately to break out, but wherever they pushed their advance, a team of battlesuits was there to meet them.

'Firestream squadrons intercept, Sun Sharks, reinforce,' Shadowsun transmitted, her tone terse. 'Flanking cadres deploy heavy armour. Ensure none escape.'

Barely a second later three squadrons of skimmers and a trio of Sun Shark bombers rose into view over the ridge. The shadows of their T-shaped hulls flitted across the shale, a shoal of fish cutting close to the bed of some soulless ocean. Anti-grav motors humming, they bore down on the white-armoured gue'ron'sha. Their burst cannons levelled quadruple plasma blasts into the bikers, taking five of them from the saddle in as many seconds. The fusion blasters of the squadron behind them killed the same number again.

One of the surviving riders, a savage-looking brute whose head appeared to be little more than an unruly mass of hair, skidded his bike around and drove it hard up a jutting spire of rock. Rider and bike sailed through the air to land wheels-first on an oncoming Piranha. The dead weight of the flying bike bore the skimmer to the ground below with a crushing impact that saw the tau pilots broken and bleeding in the remains of their craft.

Two of the hairy rider's comrades were inspired to follow suit, launching their

bikes from the same spire. One was immediately torn apart in mid-flight by a blast of fusion energy, but the other caught the edge of a passing Piranha's wing with a cupped hand and yanked it so hard the skimmer was tipped wildly off course. The Piranha ploughed into the dark scree at the ridge's edge before exploding in a burst of violet flame.

Just as Shadowsun was coming in for another pass, her meteorological readouts spiked hard. The anomalies seemed to centre in a spiralling vortex around one of the bikers at the heart of the gue'ron'sha pack, a totem-clad elder who had drawn to a halt with arms outstretched. Guttural syllables spilled from the shamanic figure's lips, non-words that her autotrans could not understand.

A second later a gale force wind thick with razor-edged shale flew out from the elder's outstretched and blasted into the tau skimmers. The sudden hurricane caused most of the light craft to careen out of control. Some clashed wings and collided, whilst others were hurled away over the ridge as if a giant invisible hand had flung them away in disgust. Seeing the destruction ahead, the Sun Sharks peeled off, flinging their craft into evasive manoeuvres to avoid the chaos of the storm.

Shadowsun wanted to explain the phenomenon away as some advanced weapon system built into the shaman's gauntlets, yet something in her chest told her otherwise. Here was the impossible mind-science of the gue'la, once thought a mere rumour from the edges of the Damocles Gulf. In truth it was clearly a very real threat, and all the more dangerous to the tau if they did not understand it.

A warrior capable of destroying two squadrons of skimmers at range could not be allowed to live. Ignoring the vulgar challenges spooling across her autotrans, Shadowsun altered her flight into a swoop towards the shaman, her shield drones buzzing in close.

There was a low roar from the east, a rumble of thunderous engines that shook the dust from atop the smaller ridges. Anticipating her request, Oe-ken-yon's telesensors blipped her long-range visuals. Five squadrons of Imperial gun-skimmers were coming in at breakneck speed, the gue'ron'sha equivalent of the Piranhas the shaman had crippled seconds before.

'Flanking cadres engage and repel inbound gun-skimmers,' said Shadowsun, 'First and second Crisis teams, enact Rinyon encirclement. Priority kill on the indicated leader. Then engage at will.'

Her own cadre blipped golden assent, but as for the reserve cadres in the canyons below the ridge, only dull steel icons pulsed flat.

'Flanking cadres! Where are you?'

'Commander, we... we have encountered an unseen force of gue'ron'sha in

the ravines,' came the reply. 'We are already... fully engaged. I offer... contrition for our absence.' The voice was strained, its pauses indicative of a gunfight that raged even as they spoke.

Shadowsun cancelled her order for reinforcements with a blink-push, her lips set firm. They would have to deal with this new foe themselves.

At the lip of the ridge, her Sun Shark squadrons had rallied for another attack run. They were coming back in low over the wrecked Imperial gunships and the gue'ron'sha sheltering in their lee. One by one the Sun Sharks dropped more of their temporal anomaly bombs, each detonating with a shimmering burst of white light. In truth Shadowsun did not understand how the earth caste had devised such weapons – despite the fact she had slept in stasis herself for many long years – but their efficacy was beyond question. Oe-ken-yon's telesensors blipped footage of a low blitz that force-aged each gunship's wreckage into rusting scrap and left the warriors nearby as slumped skeletons inside yellowed suits of armour.

Around her, six battlesuits shouldered their way through a smattering of pistol fire to converge on the leader of the gue'ron'sha force. Bolter fire thudded home, knocking two shas'ui off balance but failing to score a kill. The Crisis teams closed in, weapons raised. They formed a circle within a circle, converging upon the leader of the enemy riders.

The air was suddenly filled with a crossfire of heavy-gauge bolts. They hammered through the air to burst like flak on the armour of the hovering battlesuits, some of them long-range fire from the advancing skimmers, others from the still-operational turrets of the downed gunships at the ridge. Both of Shadowsun's forward Crisis teams were caught in the teeth of the double fusillade, jerked like the marionettes of a mad puppeteer as they were buffeted by the explosions. Two battlesuits were blasted limb from limb as they desperately tried to escape the lethal storm of detonations around them.

'All teams rise, maximum thrust!' shouted Shadowsun, a molten pool of anger burning in her stomach, 'Get up high so the Broadsides can add their fire! Then re-engage!'

Her battlesuit teams climbed into the sky, jetpacks heat-shimmering columns of air behind them. Shadowsun's meteorological readouts spiked again, and the unnatural storm came in once more. This time it was more tornado than hurricane, a wall of angry wind and razored black stone.

Shadowsun saw one of her shas'ui pilots caught by the wind, his battlesuit hurtled around by its uncanny forces and flung in a smoking tangle of limbs into a scree-covered ridge. Its ochre paint had been stripped away, leaving little more than a landscape of dented alloy and ruined circuitry.

The black tornado whipped around the rallying bikers below, interposing itself between her battlesuits and their prey and moving eastward at speed. Several of her teams made to pursue, but the Imperial skimmers moved parallel, sending streams of explosive bolts towards any who got too close.

‘Leave them,’ said Shadowsun. ‘Disengage. Their mind-science must be studied before it can be effectively countered.’

Golden assent signals blipped, though not nearly enough of them for her liking. Perhaps a quarter of her team-symbols had faded to the charcoal grey of death.

Shadowsun surveyed the carnage left behind in the wake of the gue’ron’sha’s retreat. Sighing, she flicked through Oe-ken-yon’s footage of the battle in order to consolidate whatever knowledge she could at first glance. From above, the path of the gue’ron’sha’s mounted assault had formed two thick zigzagging columns that shot out from the frontal ramps of their downed gunships, then at the last moment fanned out in a wide delta formation to strike home. She was reminded of the lightning storms of Vior’la she had watched as a child – magnificent, deadly, and all but impossible to predict.

A learning experience, then, and a costly one. A harrowing number of tau bodies lay scattered about the ridge, some cast from their skimmer cockpits, others dangling from the smoking tombs of their mangled battlesuits. Her frown deepened as she realised there was something wrong, something even more unsettling than the sight of so many tau dead.

Though at least a dozen of the armoured bikes the Imperials used to such effect lay scattered and smoking in the shale, not a single gue’ron’sha body was amongst them.

INTERLUDE 1-0

‘- - - SO MANY CORPSES - - -’ the autotrans scrolled, its whisper-waveform jerking peaks and troughs. Shadowsun eye-flicked it off, and the buzzing in her head subsided a little. Yet it was still there, reminding her of the death, the blood.

The symbol of the Supreme Ethereal blipped on her interior command screen for a second, and she transmitted a halt designation to her cadre.

‘Master Aun’Va, greatest respects,’ said Shadowsun, averting her eyes as the Ethereal Majesty appeared on her central screen. Even with her gaze cast down she could see his reflection on the inactive side of her battlesuit’s interior dome. A drawn, grey slab of a face with the wisdom of aeons etched into its angles. Aun’Va’s visage was framed by the Crown of Communities, the headdress that denoted the blessing of the entire tau empire. Shadowsun found her heart quicken in her chest at the thought that he was speaking to her, and her alone.

‘O’Shaserra,’ the projection intoned, his voice grave and resonant. ‘I hope your preparations are complete.’

‘They are, master,’ she replied. ‘Gue’la weaknesses are many, and easily exploited.’

‘Excellent. This world must fall, my child, and soon. The Greater Good demands it.’

‘Its demise is imminent, master.’

‘O’Shassera, did you just tell me the demise of the Greater Good is imminent?’ said Aun’Va, incredulity twisting his features.

‘No!’ protested Shadowsun, fear grabbing at her ribs with its cold claws. ‘No, of course not, master! The demise of Agrellan, I mean... I mean the Imperial forces upon Agrellan.’

‘I see. State clearly what you mean to say in future, child. There is no room for ambiguity in times of war.’

‘As you say, master.’

There was a long pause, stretching out until it seemed to fill the battlesuit dome's interior with suffocating silence. At times like this, she was very glad it was forbidden to meet her master's gaze. She would rather have pushed hot coals into her eyes than witness his displeasure.

Eventually Aun'Va spoke. 'Am I to understand the gue'la military forces remain active?'

'There have been... developments, master,' she said, recovering herself. 'Three lander ships escaped the air caste's orbital cordon. A gue'ron'sha strike force, a gue'la regiment ship, and the Imperial force recently designated as House Terryn.'

'Have they not been dealt with?'

'We are whittling them down, master. Their reinforcements were unexpectedly... capable.'

She appended Oe-ken-yon's clearest sensor capture of the colossal walkers the Imperium had deployed at Agrellan Prime.

'Whittling them down,' repeated Aun'Va. 'I see. So in fact you have failed to destroy them in the time frame allocated. In doing so you have allowed these... monstrosities to regroup with their gue'ron'sha allies.'

Shadowsun said nothing, her eyes all but closed in shame.

'Commander Puretide would be disappointed in your progress. The empire requires more than patience to realise its destiny.' The Supreme Ethereal's long grey lips turned down slightly, a pout of disapproval that Shadowsun realised she hated and feared more than anything else. Perhaps even more than the Traitor.

The Supreme Ethereal paused, his hooded eyelids low and his large black pupils flicked back in brief meditation. His grey mask could well have been stone for all the life in it.

'I shall be leading the final assault on Agrellan's principal fortress,' he said, returning to his former statesmanlike demeanour. 'It is time the empire is reminded that none are exempt from strife in the name of the Greater Good. Not even those who watch over it. My ship is already inbound upon your position.'

'But... Master, I...' stammered Shadowsun, her mind whirling.

'This shall occur. Within three ro'taa this world will be given a more fitting name – Mu'gulath Bay, the Gate of New Hope. The empire's assimilation of this mineral-rich region will continue apace. You have command of an entire coalition in order to ensure it. The matter of the military details I leave to you.'

'Of course, master. It shall be done.'

'I am sure of it. The earth caste have assured me their fusion array upon Agrellan's moon is essentially complete. The planetoid is only a matter of decs from its orbital zenith. The water caste are already in influential positions within

those hives that will provide us gue've'sa for the next phase of expansion. The air caste have ensured total superiority of transfer for my fleet. It is only the fire caste that slow the empire's progress.'

'That... that is my fault, master,' said Shadowsun, her voice little more than a whisper. 'I shall work all the harder, forgoing sleep to ensure my caste's success whilst remaining at optimum operational efficiency. I shall adopt,' – she took a shallow breath before saying it – 'I shall adopt the strategy of Mont'ka.'

'What you will do, O'Shaserra, is accompany me in the creation of a breach in the primary hive's walls,' said Aun'Va, his orb-like eyes wide. 'This breach will be secured by a contingency cadre inbound on your position, details appended. There shall the killing blow land. I intend for the footage of our glorious military victory to be broadcast across the entire empire.'

Shadowsun spared an eye-flick to scan Aun'Va's transmitted append. 'XV104s...' she said, her eyes growing wide. 'They are to be field-tested upon Agrellan, master? How many?'

'A number sufficient to the task.'

'Master Aun'Va, with these resources we shall create a legend here, that I promise you.'

'Yes. I shall.'

A moment of silence passed. Aun'Va nodded slowly, staring hard at her as if he was reading her thoughts.

'Master...' said Shadowsun, her voice catching.

'My child?' the Supreme Ethereal replied. His tone was tired, as if he knew what was coming next, and had nothing but contempt for it.

'Has there been any word of Shoh?'

The Supreme Ethereal's grey lips grew thin.

'Concentrate on the matter at hand, O'Shaserra,' he said. 'We shall speak of the Traitor soon enough.'

The flickering firelight caused the shadows of the fur-clad Chogorians to dance across the circle of bikes surrounding them. Their powerful machines faced outward in every direction, ready for the White Scars to mount up and disperse at a moment's notice.

The khan's warriors listened in attentive silence as he prepared to issue instructions for the next stage of the hunt.

'Our quarry is cunning, and not to be underestimated,' he began. 'The xenos witch has had the better of us once, but will not do so again. At sunrise, we will—'

Kor'sarro's voice broke off as a faint silhouette began to take shape amid the

darkness. As one, every White Scar aimed his bolter at the ebon figure's head. The stranger did not flinch.

'In the name of the Great Khan, identify yourself!' roared Jebe, Kor'sarro's company champion, as he unsheathed his sword.

'Stand down, brothers,' ordered the khan, gesturing to his men to lower their weapons. 'I know him.'

Kor'sarro Khan was aware of only one person in the entire galaxy that could infiltrate a Space Marine camp undetected. The khan's warriors obeyed his command without question, though the scornful sneer he wore did little to ease the tension.

Without a word, the newcomer reached up and unclasped his helm to reveal a narrow, pallid face beneath a veil of lank, black hair. It was Shadow Captain Shrike.

'We meet again, Raven Guard,' the khan growled. 'What brings your kind here? Have you come to spill xenos blood or skulk in the shadows and leave the fighting to real warriors?'

'My "kind" have been engaging the enemy in covert operations for ten days,' stated Shrike. 'We engaged the tau relief forces in the canyons either side of your position at Blackshale Ridge. Did you not wonder how you managed to escape the ambush against such odds?'

The khan's eyes narrowed at this, but Shrike continued before the White Scar could respond. 'I bring orders from my master, Corvin Severax. This world is lost. The xenos forces arrayed against us are too great, and my scouts report that the tau are massing for a final assault.'

The realisation of what Shrike was about to say hit the khan like a sledgehammer. 'You wish us to retreat? Craven!'

'Severax has assumed full command of all Imperial forces in this sector and has called for the evacuation of all military assets and personnel on Agrellan – including you, brother. Given our history, he thought it prudent you heard this from me. He knew these orders would not be to your taste. The *Wings of Deliverance* awaits us in orbit, and two Magnus-class drop-ships are berthed in the hive's triumphal boulevard for transfer. You are to accompany me back to Agrellan Prime for immediate extraction.'

'Then he was wise to send you and no other, lest I gut them for their cowardice,' growled khan. 'But if these are indeed my orders, then I will do my duty, even though it stains my honour. White Scars, we ride! See you in Agrellan or hell, brother!'

'Hell awaits us all at Agrellan Prime,' Shrike muttered grimly.

The curving corridors of the *Undeniable Truth* were still haunted by the sterile tang of its production dome. Through the spaceship's white reaches shuffled the squat-bodied, muscular shapes of earth caste scientists. Each of them paused every thirty steps or so, raising a flat grey wand and taking complex readings from the oblong viewing ports that soared up to the roof high above. So far, every one of the nova reactors nestled within the corridors' inhabitants had been emitting ideal data.

One of the earth caste scientists stepped up to the viewing port. Wiping the condensation from the plastiglass, he moved his face in close, looking up like a child who had been raised underground and brought out to see the night sky for the first time.

An armoured colossus stood there in the near-darkness, its sensor-lenses pulsing gently in harmony with the terrifying potential energy at its heart.

The XV104 Riptide – a hero's mantle of magnificent and terrible beauty – was soon to be unleashed.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE GREAT HIVES ABSALOM CONTINENT AGRELLAN, 747.999.M41

One by one, Agrellan's great metropolises began to fall.

The first to face Shadowsun's impeccably planned onslaughts were the three hives of the Acacian Basin. This time the White Scars, after being humbled at the battle of Blackshale Ridge and ordered to retreat to Agrellan Prime, were unable to prevent the tau offensive that hammered out from each hives' blind spots. With the main gun nests and artillery domes of each Acacian hive buried under thousands of tonnes of ferrocrete, Shadowsun's cadres picked apart each mountainous city like razor ants dismantling the carcass of a dying grox.

The Imperium was slow to learn from its mistakes, but it was not incapable. The war council of Agrellan Prime, forced to admit that the Acacian hives were as good as lost, resolved that those cities yet to be attacked would not be caught slumbering. They placed every hive on full alert, ensuring their artillery domes were manned around the clock and their vigilis-class servo-skulls were actively questing for signs of tau invaders.

Imperial Knights strode around the fractured borders of each vast city, ready and eager for battle at a moment's notice. In the meantime they turned their cannons upon those outcrops and spires that occluded the hive's fields of fire, methodically demolishing them with melta blasts or the relentless pounding of battle cannon shells. Despite the evacuations preceding each clearance, many citizens were lost in the landslides of rockcrete that were created by each barrage. Yet as each hive's cataracts were removed one by one, its vision was

sharpened once more, and the gold zones that Shadowsun had used to such effect in the Acacian Basin were eliminated.

With the tau's advantage of surprise spent in the initial phases of the war, Agrellan was ready and waiting for the next bout of bloodshed. A world given over to the production of war materiel was now armed and armoured to the hilt.

Ultimately, it made little difference.

Imortis Hive, whose outer walls were so thick that conventional bombardments were useless against it, fell to its own defences. Though dormant gravity mines studded the folds in its walls, each intended to drag enemies into a pre-prepared kill zone, their locations had been determined long ago. Even before she had made planetfall Shadowsun's orbital scans had uncovered their unusual energy signatures. At their commander's behest, tau ranged support cadres edged towards the hive and sent their nimble gun drones to make a simultaneous approach. Small enough to evade the auspice arrays of the monolithic structure, the drones closed in, disc-like beads on a gossamer-thin garrotte closing around the hive's throat. The drones triggered every one of the mines in a single diving assault, and the resultant gravitic dissonance was so strong that, although the gun drones were crushed flat, the hive's walls were made momentarily vulnerable by their own density.

The cadre's subsequent railgun volleys spread hairline cracks that turned to finger-wide gaps, then gaping fissures until the impossibly strong gravity fields tore the walls down under their own weight. Under the cover of the colossal dust clouds thrown up by the ruinous collapse, hunter cadres by the dozen powered inside, debarking from their anti-grav Devilfish transports to cut down the hive's defenders in a merciless urban war.

Gorvus Hive, the fiercest and most vigilant of all its kind, fell to the wiles of Shas've Draï. In the shadowy depths of the hive's industrial layers, Draï's chameleonic battlesuit teams were all but undetectable. Each stealth group fought its way through the territory of fierce underhive gangs and up to the sloping shoulders of the hive, emerging bloodied but undetected onto the artillery eyries overlooking the plains. The precision violence of their ambush cut down the crew of each artillery battery with ease, their fusion blasters reducing the Hydra flak tanks themselves to molten scrap.

By robbing Gorvus Hive of its anti-aircraft capabilities, the stealth groups had ensured that their air caste allies could close in unmolested. Razorsharks shot down those few aircraft the hive could launch in its defence as Paradox squadrons circled the spires like vultures, dropping stasis bombs on the canopies and domes that protected its people from Agrellan's toxic atmosphere.

The deadly zephyrs of the planet's wastes slowly filtered into the hive's innards, and soon panic had broken out in every district. It was as potent a weapon of conquest as any bomb. Gorvite citizens fought tooth and nail for the rebreathers and puritan canisters that were worn by the richer members of the populace, just as Shadowsun had known they would, for humans were selfish and had little concept of a greater good.

Before the hour was out, the hive's gates had been flung wide by swarming refugees seeking the safety of neighbouring cities. The people that formed the hive's lifeblood spilled out onto the toxic plains in screaming rivers and desperate, pooling crowds. So it was that whilst Imortis fell from without, Gorvus fell from within.

Rebellion took Barantius Hive, a fortress famous for the great macrocannons that girdled its thick waist. After inveigling their way inside the underhive, water caste ambassadors had traded cutting edge plasma weaponry to every gang leader they could find in exchange for little more than a handful of Imperial silver. When the Adeptus Arbites came for the tau that had been anonymously reported as lurking in the gangers' midst, the trigger-happy hivers were more than ready to test out their new guns in defence of their new 'friends'.

Skirmishes turned into bloodbaths as the enforcers of the noble houses came down heavily upon those gangs that had dared resist them. With the temper of the oppressed masses already dangerously short, the tau ambassadors found it easy to fan the spark of revolt into a raging inferno. The entire underhive mobilised into an uprising that coursed through the hive city, consuming it layer by layer as the wordcraft of the tau ambassadors worked its subtle magic. Before the day was out even the highest spires were taken – not by tau warriors, but by human guerrillas only too glad to turn the tables on their long-time oppressors. In the end, Barantius fell without a single one of its macrocannons being fired.

Predominus Hive was next. Huge shield discs jutted from every structure sturdy enough to hold them, a profusion of hemispheres reminiscent of the plate-fungus that clusters to the trunk of an ancient tree. Though they were individually weak, when all of these discs were at maximum output the hive was shrouded by a shimmering cloak of energy that could deflect artillery shells and lascannon beams alike. With every generator in the lower hive given over to these defences, the populace considered themselves invulnerable.

The hive's citizens were to be disabused of this notion in the most horrific and final of ways. As Agrellan's great cities were taken apart in a dozen locations, the planet's moon appeared full and gloating directly above the spires of Predominus. From the armourglass balconies and vivariums of the hive's upper levels, a tiny blue flicker could be seen in the planetoid's deepest crater. The

flicker grew larger, then larger still, until it hurt to look at the sky.

Then, with a window-shattering thunderclap, a column of fusion energy the width of a mag-train stabbed down into the topmost spire of Predominus. It blasted the hive apart from within, a hundred thousand gun ports and archways venting sheets of blue-white energy in a single cataclysmic explosion. As Shadowsun had predicted, the fusion lance's fell energies were contained within the same protective force fields that had been designed to protect the hive. Instead of being released they raged like a trapped firestorm, burning away every living thing inside and out until the hive was little more than crumbling ash.

The price of such destructive power was high, for the titanic release of energy from the earth caste mega-weapon upon Agrellan's moon caused a fusion reactor meltdown of unprecedented scale. The backlash consumed half of Agrellan's moon in blue fire, cracking the rest of the honeycombed orb into little more than space debris. Yet the deed was done. For the loss of less than fifty earth caste scientists, the tau coalition had obliterated over seven billion hivers.

Adronicus Hive fell next, then Stormspire, then Olnius, each taken down by a military masterstroke that turned the hive's power against itself. Shadowsun's worldwide Mont'ka strategy had halved the planet's population and reduced its fortresses to rubble in the space of a single day.

Yet for all the deadly genius that Shadowsun had exhibited elsewhere on the planet, it was the conquest of Agrellan Prime that was to become legendary.

Kor'sarro Khan leant forward out of the cupola of the Rhino *Steelsteed*, toxic winds whipping across his face as the transport hurtled through the desiccated forest. The air was foul, and he could feel his multi-lung pumping at maximum capacity next to his spine. At least he could see his surroundings. Moondrakkan would take weeks to replace, and in the meantime there was no way he was going to hide from sight like a tau coward.

The khan's transport was the arrowhead point of an armoured column that made all speed towards the evac site at Agrellan Prime. Each vehicle bore the white and red heraldry of the White Scars, the remains of its biker squads acting as outriders on either flank. Inside each Rhino and Razorback was a squad itching for battle, praying for the xenos to bar their path so they could take a measure of revenge before the evacuation craft bore them into the night sky.

Less than a hundred metres ahead of the *Steelsteed*, the contrails of Raven Guard jump packs flickered blue. The khan's allies shot through the forest, their fast but stealthy approach in stark contrast to the White Scars juggernaut charge. Shrike had insisted the khan's men take the forest road, sticking to the natural camouflage of the white trees for as long as possible before making a break for

the walls of Agrellan Prime. After his losses at Blackshale Ridge, Kor'sarro had reluctantly acquiesced, part of him silently grateful that his loss of the steed Moondrakkan would be less evident if they rode through woodland instead of the open wastes.

'Slippery tau hag,' he muttered into the wind. The enemy commander had twice escaped him now, twice evaded Moonfang's steel bite. If the witch hadn't have been xenos, perhaps... perhaps the hatred he felt for her would be closer to respect.

A cloud of orange flame flickered up ahead, and the trunks of dead trees threw out stark shadows as shrill screams rose into the night. On either side of the forest road, baleful eyes flashed in the gloom. The khan caught flashes of heavy-set figures with their backs flattened against the desiccated trunks, white tree-dust smeared across their muscled frames.

Catachans. Kor'sarro knew fellow hunters when he saw them. But as for what they were waiting for...

An avian caw jolted Kor'sarro from his thoughts, and there came a clang of clawed feet on metal from behind him. He ducked on instinct just as a jagged blade attached to a hunting rifle swept overhead, ripping a clump of black hair from his topknot.

Face set in a grimace of contempt, the khan punched upwards and grabbed the rifle's shaft, yanking it forward to draw its owner into his line of sight. A gangly xenos stared down with beady black eyes, beak open and head-quills shaking in a primitive threat display. A kroot mercenary, savage in a fight but easily broken.

The creature's head exploded, showering the cupola and its occupant with foul-smelling gore.

Kor'sarro shouldered up to lean out of the hatch once more and scan his surroundings. He could hear bolter fire, and see the flicker-flare of mass reactive shots detonating in the distance. To the right of the *Steelsteed* rode Djubali, grinning fiercely under his mask of whipping black hair. He had a smoking bolt pistol in his hand.

'That kill was mine!' bawled Kor'sarro, wiping xenos blood from his face.

'My apologies, steedless one!' laughed his battle-brother over the din of the armoured column's engines. 'At least you look a bit more like your old gory self now!'

The khan shrugged, picking up the remains of the xenos corpse's arm and biting down into it so that blood ran down his chin. The muscle was stringy and foul, but he could feel his gut thanking him for the protein nonetheless. He smiled redly at Djubali and flung the rest of the arm at his head.

'There's whole tribes of the things!' shouted Djubali, expertly swaying his

bike so the khan's improvised projectile flailed past him. 'Straken's lot are hunting them!'

'No time to join in!' replied the khan. 'Stick to the plan!'

A solid slug pinged hard from his pauldron, some tree-hidden kroot sniper's best shot. Kor'sarro snorted in irritation, picking his helmet from the mag-clamp at his waist and pushing it down hard over his head. 'Do not fall to this distraction,' he voxed to his men. 'We've a real battle to fight. Punch through the thick of it, then on to the hive walls.'

Djubali nodded his understanding and peeled off, the bolters on the front of his bike thumping out shells into the night.

The noise of battle up ahead was intensifying. Blossoms of flame illuminated long-limbed kroot and thickly muscled Catachans as they darted through the darkness. Catachan blood spurted in black arcs, hunting staves swung and chopped, alien flesh sizzled as lasguns stabbed pinpoint volleys through the darkness. The khan breathed in the heady scent of war, opening a vox-channel to his brethren whilst the White Scars column bullied its path through the sparse forest.

'Engage only those in your path, brothers, do not slow,' the khan said. 'Deliver what wrath you can from atop your steeds.'

His men answered only with gunfire, those in the armoured column behind throwing open the top hatches of their Rhinos to send bolt shells blasting into the kroot snipers crouching in the trees. Xenos remains pattered out of the white boughs like the flesh of burst fruit.

Up ahead, a squadron of squat-bodied Imperial Guard tanks bulldozed their way into a clearing. The khan chuckled evilly as he recognised the silhouettes of their giant promethium barrels.

Hellhounds.

The oily scent of ignited promethium billowed through the forest, and a roiling bow-wave of flame blasted a nearby copse of trees to burning splinters. The khan saw long-limbed figures blaze like tallow candles in a bonfire before falling away to ash.

Dozens of kroot fled from the Hellhounds, sprinting right towards the armoured column. They flitted and darted from tree to tree like shadows given life. Shouting a wordless war cry, the khan pivoted the cupola's storm bolter and sent a volley of rocket-propelled shells thudding into scattering aliens and desiccated vegetation alike. Each deadly little cylinder detonated on impact to spray bone-white powder and xenos remains in a wide radius. The weapon bucked hard in the khan's hands as it killed foe after foe, and the Rhino kicked like a mule as it crunched over those xenos too slow to scatter out of its path.

Kor'sarro savoured the prickly feeling of hot adrenaline pumping through his system. Armoured warfare. There was nothing quite like it.

The Raven Guard, as focused and driven as ever, had avoided the fighting entirely to boost out of the forest and onto the parched earth girdling the hive's walls. The khan almost envied them their focus. He could no sooner pass through a forest of foes without taking a few kills than he could devour a Land Raider. Still, their advance had not slowed, and the edge of the desiccated woodland was in sight.

The White Scars column bullied its way out of the forest at breakneck speed, the crushed remains of kroot mercenaries gumming the tracks of many of its vehicles. A few kilometres distant the man-made mountain of Hive Agrellan loomed impossibly tall. Its spires disappeared up into the glowering clouds, though its perimeter wall loomed close, a promise of safety wrought in brutalist rockcrete. On its upper slopes ancient guns clanked and huffed, steam gouting from their gargoyle-mouthed vents as they ground into new firing positions. The khan could swear they were taking a bead on his armoured column.

Or perhaps, thought the khan, aiming at an unseen foe closing in upon it.

'Beware the flanks, battle-brothers!' shouted the khan, 'Close all hatches! The alien is near!'

No sooner had the khan given his command than a shoal of xenos war machines hurtled down out of the low-hanging clouds towards them. Grav-skimmers, fighters, drones, battlesuits, every one of them bore down upon the White Scars with their guns spitting blue-white plasma. The Raven Guard jetting off ahead and the Catachans sprinting across the plains behind them were easy targets, but the xenos ignored them entirely. The khan could feel it in his bones. This was about revenge.

Several bikes tumbled away into the dust as the tau volleys hit home, and a Razorback flipped over as a volley of missiles struck its tracks. Rhinos were rocked on their suspension by seeker missiles that slammed into their hatches over and over again, hammering in hard as if trying to get at the Space Marines inside. The khan growled in frustration, longing to change tactic and engage them head on, but knowing the time for such tactics had passed.

'Force Jekobah, Force Khenik, introduce yourselves,' Kor'sarro growled into the vox. A moment later he heard the signature boom of turbo-boosted engines as eight Land Speeders and a Stormraven gunship roared out from the forest road to fill the skies with heavy bolter fire. Many of the shells hit home, and the blazing wreckage of tau drones and light aircraft fell out of the skies, long plumes of smoke trailing behind them as they corkscrewed towards the parched earth.

A guttural chanting came from behind Kor'sarro. Sudabeh had shouldered his way out of the *Steelstead's* top hatch, his force staff raised high. The seer's eyes filled red, the air around him crackling faintly as his conjuration reached its zenith. Far above, the clouds above the approaching tau strike force began to curl.

'Ha!' barked the khan. 'Show them a real storm, old friend!'

The curling clouds turned into a spiral, then a vortex, its interior lit with ruddy streaks of lightning. Here and there an electrical bolt would crackle out with a loud snapping sound, discharging towards the tau warsuits that were sending missiles arcing down towards their position. Several of the bipedal weapons platforms took direct hits, and though they were left physically intact they fell away nonetheless, dropping like falling statues to the earth.

The khan's breath came quick. The vast city's walls were less than three kilometres away. They could still make it. Even under heavy fire, they could make it.

He looked to the west, and saw dim shadows. He looked up, and his eyes widened.

Drifting down from the lightning-haunted skies came a new kind of death.

Four alien war machines emerged from the roiling clouds, so large and powerful that any one of them could have flipped the *Steelstead* with one hand. The ever-present warsuits of the tau the khan had fought before. They were usually as tall as a Dreadnought and carried much the same firepower. Yet even those deadly things would barely have come up to the waists of the technological horrors that now came for them.

A single cyclopean eye glowed dull red in each boxy head, nestled small amongst the massive bulk of their segmented torsos and jetpack arrays. On the left arm of each massive warsuit discus shields shimmered, tiny flickers of Sudabeh's red lightning dancing across the domes of force they projected. On their right arms were guns almost as large as the *Khan Spear's* turbo-laser destructor.

The paired giants at the front of the formation raised their cannons, complex rotary weapons whose multiple barrels whirred into black and ochre blurs. The rising whine of the spinning barrels were soon joined by great bass pulses, the weapons booming *voh-voh-voh-voh* as arm-sized plasma bolts blitzed into the Raven Guard. Wherever the blinding white lozenges struck home, black-armoured Space Marines were bowled six metres into the dust, skidding to a halt in a tangle of smoking limbs and charred ceramite.

Behind them came two more of the monstrosities, boosting forward to take up

kneeling stances in the dust. Bluish light poured from the vents in their double-barrelled cannons as their thrumming reactors powered up for the shot. A *krak* missile shot out from one of the Rhinos in the middle of the armoured column, its firer hoping to disrupt whatever barrage was to come. His aim was true, and the missile smacked right into the leftmost warsuit, detonating with a clap of percussive force. It did nothing more than discolour the colossus' ochre hide.

Then the warsuits returned fire.

With an enormous, blaring *tzonng*, two starbursts of ion energy flared out from the underslung cannons. Each boulder-sized sphere burned a trail through the air before smacking straight into the armoured column.

One of the blinding balls punched into the side of a Rhino, annihilating a full half of its hull in an instant. Flailing Space Marines spilled out amongst the smouldering remains of their comrades a moment before the vehicle exploded with a ground-shaking boom.

The other energy sphere burst upon the hull of a Razorback, incinerating its upper half and turning its lascannon turret into a pillar of crackling smoke. The stricken vehicle veered, tilted, and slowly toppled over, sending nearby bikers scattering away from its burning wreck.

'Keep moving!' shouted the khan, waving at his men to circumvent the ruined transports. 'Full throttle! Full dispersal!'

Muting the vox for a second, Kor'sarro clucked his tongue in frustration and anger. With the Thunderhawks gone, they had nowhere near enough firepower to deal with this new threat, let alone the massed tau strike force on their right. Their only hope was speed and determination.

Luckily, those were qualities the White Scars had in great measure.

The Rhinos and Razorbacks broke into a loose pack and accelerated hard, their biker escorts swerving and kinking in a loose perimeter around them. The Land Speeders, still harrying the strike force descending on the right flank, wove interlocking patterns that made it all but impossible to settle cross hairs upon them.

Then Agrellan Hive spoke, a single word of death that shook the earth.

One of the giant tau warsuits was blown to scrap in an instant, its internal reactor sending a mushroom cloud high into the air as the hive's ordnance hit home. The other three suits rocked back in surprisingly human stances, their discus shields flaring as their force fields soaked up the worst of the baleful energies.

Turning back to the White Scars, the warsuits opened fire once more, as intent on the kill as any true hunter. The multi-barrelled rotary cannons of the foremost warsuits perforated the *Steelsteed* in half a dozen places, and the khan ducked

low into the cupola as the vehicle shuddered like a frightened beast. Yet the stout machine kept going, carving a zigzag path into the shadow of the hive walls.

The same could not be said for the men inside. Three of the runes corresponding to the khan's command squad flickered red in his helmet display.

'Apothecary Stebekh, tend to those hit by that last volley,' snapped the khan, the medic in the *Steelsteed's* hold voxing acknowledgement.

'Solarus Gate, harken all stations!' shouted Kor'sarro, watching in envy as the surviving Raven Guard triggered their jump packs to bound effortlessly over the perimeter wall. 'We require immediate entry! We're under heavy fire out here. We request entry!'

The vox-net crackled, but there was no response.

Behind him, another blaring *tzonng* was followed by the dull crump of a vehicle detonation. In the distance, two more explosions erupted from the transports at the rear of the column. Orange death-fires illuminated the cloud of smaller battlesuits hovering above them like a host of predatory angels.

'By the Emperor's holy throne, Solarus, give us an open port or I'll cut my way inside and kill you myself!'

'Quite impossible,' came the gatemaster's reply, his prim tone failing entirely to conceal the panic beneath.

Then, in a blaze of light, an opening appeared in the great Agrellan wall.

But it was not the warriors of the Imperium who had made it.

The yield capacitors of Shadowsun's fusion blasters blipped gold. She dropped down from the flickering skies towards the column of boxy Imperial vehicles and triggered another full shot, twin beams of destructive energy spearing vertically downwards. She hit one of the lumpen things full on, an olive-hued tank that was little more than a mobile box filled with gue'la troopers. The transport exploded with a satisfying thump, and its passengers spilled out, grabbing for rebreathers or rolling out the fires that clung to their disgusting porcine flesh.

Yelling in defiance, the gunners in the cupolas of the other transports pivoted their pintle-mounted weapons towards the source of the killing shot. Shadowsun swung her hips back and her chest forward, her battlesuit smoothly boosting away from the chattering streams of slugs sent in her direction. Even a raw recruit could have avoided the ill-timed volley fired by the human soliders, and her stealth cells made her all but invisible against the flickering clouds above. Such poor warriors did not deserve to face the might of the XV104s. As if to prove her point, Draï's team came alongside her, levelled their burst cannons, and tore apart the cupola gunners in a storm of blood and plasma.

This really is too easy, thought Shadowsun. There was little honour in shooting a fleeing foe, especially one as dull of wit as the Imperial Guard. Even their name was ridiculous. She was almost regretting ordering the Riptides to engage the gue'ron'sha instead of tackling them herself. Still, she reminded herself, Aun'Va had other duties in mind for her.

It was time for the killing blow to fall.

'Counterstrike cadres,' she transmitted, her tones clipped and sure. 'Neutralise as many of these transports as possible. Firststrike cadre, I want that wall breached immediately. Approach on appended vectors, Riptides at the fore. Full nova, then sentinel protocols. Oe-ken-yon, use the dronenet to get high-yield footage. Skystrike cadre – your Riptides have the honour of being the first inside. Prepare a path.'

The assent symbols of the Riptide wings flashed gold, their size and unfamiliarity filling Shadowsun with quiet pride. To have such warriors at her command, to be the first in the empire to wield them as her blade... it was an honour beyond measure.

She could feel the pull of Mont'ka tugging at her soul. With weapons such as these...

' - - - YES - - - KILL - - - SEND THEM TO THEIR GRAVES - - - '

Shadowsun felt a hot prickle of unease cross her skin. She could have sworn she had turned the autotrans off when she was mustering the cadres in the cloud cover, to prevent... to prevent unnecessary distractions. Mont'ka required total focus.

Ahead of her the Riptides she had claimed for her Firststrike cadre dropped out of the clouds above the hive's wall. Their nova reactors thrummed to a crescendo as they hovered to a halt in front of the gate's towers. Suddenly, blue-white spheres shot from their energy cannons, hitting home with such force they chewed a wide breach in the eagle-emblazoned gate. The walls around the opening were riven by a web of cracks, tumbling rubble carrying those Imperial Guardsmen that had been manning the gate's battlements to a rocky demise.

The XV104s had blasted open the human fortress in a single devastating salvo. Behind the breach, the hive's sprawling innards were laid bare. An iron-grated perimeter road met a cliff wall of pipes and platforms across which hundreds of ant-like citizens scurried, desperate to escape. Imperial Guard troops pushed their way through the teeming hivers to take up positions on landing pads and crenulated defence stations.

Shadowsun flew in close to the hive's outer wall, blasting the face from a statue of an Imperial saint as she passed by. The paired Riptides that had ripped open the city's wall bracketed her like armoured giants escorting an airborne

goddess. Behind her, the three surviving Riptides that had mauled the gue'ron'sha tanks hovered towards the breach at speed, boosting over the postern gate on contrails of blue flame. They unleashed a hail of heavy burst cannon fire as they came back down in the perimeter streets, splayed metal feet landing with a rockcrete-shattering crunch.

The other two Riptides stood guard, interposing themselves between the oncoming armoured column and the safety beyond the breach. Shas've Draï's stealth teams were already inside, sowing confusion and distraction amongst the gue'la troopers rushing to reinforce the breach. This would be the battle that the tau empire demanded of her – loud, spectacular, and bloody in the extreme.

'The way has been opened, master,' she transmitted on a secure frequency. 'My teams are securing it now.'

Aun'Va's grey face flickered large.

'Not before time, O'Shaserra. I shall begin my descent.'

'Acknowledged, master,' sent Shadowsun, her heart beating hard. Soon she would fight alongside the Supreme Ethereal himself.

If their plan succeeded, a scene of timeless glory would blossom on every screen and hologram across the empire.

And if it failed, she would die in utter disgrace.

The Riptides of Shadowsun's Firststrike cadre blocked the breach completely, the towering XV104s standing shoulder to shoulder as they discharged accelerated ionic blasts into the scattered gue'ron'sha below. Too brave or stupid to seek cover, the enemy still came on, despite over two-thirds of their number lying dead or dying across the cratered battleground outside the hive.

Though she could not directly see the three Riptides of the Skystrike cadre, their symbols glowed gold on her command suite as they strode impervious along the perimeter walls. Those enemy warriors ensconced in the hive's bulk were firing upon them with missiles, large-calibre bolts, even plasma fire of their own. Yet not one of the three battlesuits showed anything other than a healthy gold of full operative capacity.

Shadowsun watched a double string of heavy burst cannon fire pulse white across the battlements. Wherever the plasma bolts struck, the human soldiers manning the walls were reduced to a fine red mist. Those who had hidden from the Riptides' cannonades were torn apart by the smart missiles fired by the launchers mounted atop their shoulders, contrails snaking through the crenulations to double back hard and detonate with killing force.

These beautiful new machines were a vision made real for the fire caste. Shadowsun felt sad that Commander Puretide was not here to witness them.

With the enemy reeling, the rest of the commander's Counterstrike cadre had approached the walls in their skimmer transports and were deploying in a tight guard formation. So far so good, thought Shadowsun. The next stage was already upon them.

Soaring out from the flickering clouds over the plains was the pride of the air caste's sub-orbital fleet, the Manta missile destroyer *Burning Hope*. Red lightning played across its splayed wings, but even the mind-science of the gue'ron'sha shaman had no hope of stopping such a massive craft. Shadowsun smiled thinly. Tau technology, in sufficient measure, could overcome any challenge.

The *Burning Hope* soared over the plains, coming in so low that the flattening force of its engines bowled over the human warriors darting amongst the wreckage beneath. As it bellied in close, the gunship's rail cannons let loose a volley with a deafening whip-crack, shattering one of the hive's artillery domes before it could fire and blasting the proud statuary above the secondary gate to powder. Burst cannons on the edge of the *Hope*'s graceful hull poured plasma into the ruined battlements around the breach, forcing the black-armoured gue'ron'sha taking position there to dive for cover.

Then, as the rear portal of the *Burning Hope* irised open and his escort cadre deployed in parade formation, the Supreme Ethereal Aun'Va entered the fray.

Aun'Va's fire warrior escort marched determinedly towards the breach, their pulse rifles levelling volley after volley at those Imperial troops disrespectful enough to look upon their leader. In the centre of the formation came the spiritual leader of the tau empire, seated comfortably upon his disc-like gravity throne. An expression of grim serenity radiated from his stately features as he intoned words of inspiration and conquest to his men. How Shadowsun wished she were one of them, a rank and file trooper shorn of the burden of command and free to drink in the heady sensations of the Supreme Ethereal's presence. Drink it all in as she killed in his name.

The Riptides standing sentinel on either side of the breach knelt in respect at Aun'Va's approach, stabiliser pistons thunking out from their thighs as their ion accelerators hurled yet more glowing spheres at the oncoming gue'ron'sha. Oeken-yon hovered high amongst a swarm of fellow drones, his networked artificial intelligences recording every angle of Aun'Va's glorious entrance into the city.

Then, with an ear-splitting screech of tortured metal, a giant chainsword blade burst out from the chest of the leftmost Riptide and juddered through its torso in a shower of sparks.

A twisting burst of feedback roiled out, an artificial death cry that rang in every ear as the indomitable Riptide fell in crackling halves to the rubble-choked ground.

Shadowsun cried out and boosted in close, her cadre's Crisis battlesuits behind her. Behind the dying Riptide stood a hunchbacked Titan clad in the matt black of the grave. Skulls were emblazoned on every flat plane of its riveted armour, and red eye-sensors glared out from the vision slit of its impassive metal helm. The apparition's upper half twisted around with an oily scream, its tapering cannon-arm brought to bear upon the head of the second Riptide.

The battlesuit, its shield arm lowered to protect Aun'Va instead of itself, took a close range battle cannon shell right to the head. The blast sent it reeling backwards, violet sparks fizzing from its decapitated torso to crackle from the rubble of the breach.

The Riptide staggered upright, its systems whining hypersonically as it struggled to recalibrate. Shadowsun darted in close and levelled a double shot at the helm of the metal monster bearing down upon her battlesuited comrade. Her fusion blasts fizzled harmlessly across the thing's ion shield. The iron beast ignored her and stomped across the breach, contemptuously kicking a spray of rubble at the fire warriors loosing ineffectual volleys at its flank. It raised the giant chainblade that formed its left arm and brought it slashing down at the stricken Riptide just as the battlesuit triggered its jetpack. The obsidian Knight's chainblade caught the ascending Riptide's leg, ripping it bodily out of its hip socket. The monster's battle cannon clank-pumped shell after shell after the fleeing machine, a grating machine-sound coming from its mask that sounded uncannily like laughter.

'A worthy adversary,' transmitted Aun'Va over the open channel.

'Commander Shadowsun, allow your blade to fall.'

'Yes, master,' she replied. 'Skywing cadre, engage and neutralise that beast.'

Before she could finish her command a third Riptide shot horizontally across the breach on twin trails of fire, bodily smashing into the rear of the black-armoured walker and wrapping its arms around the thing's waist. Twisting hard, the Riptide yanked the obsidian machine onto one foot, causing its massive shoulders to smash into the perimeter wall with such force that several black-armoured gue'ron'sha toppled from the battlements, guns blazing as they fell. The gue'la walker fought to right itself. Its chainblade slashed the air as a second Riptide ran past just out of reach, heavy burst cannon stitching plasma blasts across the monster's ion shield.

The Imperial troops pouring into the breach had taken heart from the black-armoured Titan's attack. The Space Marines amongst the rubble cut down fire

warriors left and right with their bolt-spitting sidearms, several of their number even causing Aun'Va's personal forcefield to flash bright. Shadowsun darted a horrified glance at the ancient's image on the command screen, but she was greeted only by a serene mask.

'None can shrink from sacrifice in the name of the Greater Good,' Aun'Va boomed, his gaze directed at the c-link drone that hovered above.

Around him, the fire warriors were being forced back by the renewed assault of the black-armoured gue'ron'sha and the supporting infantry that overlooked the battle from the platforms high above. More bolter fire hammered in, this time from outside the hive's walls. Shadowsun felt her mouth go dry as she realised the Supreme Ethereal was in danger of being caught in a lethal crossfire.

The shield can often be more dangerous than the sword.

'Full defence upon the Supreme Ethereal's escort!' she shouted. 'I want a shield over Aun'Va immediately! All Firststrike units, enact now!'

The tight-knit teams of her cadre hastened to obey, coming in low to the side of the breach where the Supreme Ethereal was hovering forward. They flew in dense formation, guns bristling outwards to shred anything that got close.

Shadowsun jetted in close to her master, her tanks and battlesuits closing in tight as a turtle's shell. She blipped a symbol of strength and stability to her cadre, but inside, she was dying. One stray shot is all it would take. One random, senseless bullet, and the flame that lit the heart of the tau empire would be extinguished forever.

Trailing smoke, the *Steelsteed* careened across the cratered earth, making haste for the section of the breach that was not choked with tau bodies. In the Rhino's wake came the battered remnants of the armoured column, bouncing and slewing through the rockcrete that was scattered around the breach.

'Ha! Looks like Severax's little surprise has caught them unawares,' laughed the khan. Sudabeh harrumphed in disapproval from the opened top hatch behind him. 'Stop gloating and get us in there, Kor'sarro,' he said.

'Aye,' replied the khan, nodding and opening the vox-channel to his men. 'We have our chance, brothers,' he said, 'By the Emperor's grace, let's take it.'

The drivers of each Rhino and Razorback ground their tracked vehicles through the dense rock of the felled wall as fast as they dared. Incredibly, the heavy concentration of tau sheltering at the side of the breach let them past, firing only at the Raven Guard that were moving in to harass their position at close quarters. The remnants of the Catachan regiments followed close behind the khan's company, their olive armoured Chimeras grinding rubble to dust as they covered the last few metres into the hive.

The khan grabbed the storm bolter and swung it around to point at the tau cadre's defensive huddle, but he did not fire. There was no sense in kicking that particular hornet's nest when salvation was within reach.

'Solarus Gate!' he voxed. 'Drop a macrocannon shell onto that nest of xenos cockroaches and all is forgiven!'

Static crackled, but nothing more. High up in the artillery domes, the snap-crack of xenos plasma weaponry gave the khan the impression the only thing dropping from their positions would be human corpses.

A tremendous clang of metal on metal rang out, and the titanic black walker that Corvin Severax had set upon the tau staggered into view, locked in a wrestler's clinch with one of the massive xenos warsuits. Both were fighting for a clear shot. Although the Knight was clumsy in comparison to the tau machine, it was far stronger. Levering a limb between itself and its assailant, the obsidian walker pushed the xenos warsuit into its line of fire with the flat of its whirring chainblade. The khan watched the black-iron walker blast its tau assailant backwards with a well-placed cannon shot. Stepping forwards into the space it had cleared, the Knight brought its whirring chainblade down in a *coup de grâce* that chewed its victim apart from shoulder to hip.

As the obsidian Knight's war-horns boomed in triumph, another massive xenos warsuit descended from on high, smashing feet first into the Knight's back and pitching it forwards into the sparking remains of its kill.

'Make all speed to the grand promenade!' shouted Kor'sarro across the vox. He levelled a stream of storm bolter fire at a knot of tau infantry darting through the rubble in the shadow of the wall, only to be greeted by the serial click of his empty ammo cache running dry. No sooner had he sworn in frustration than a new clip was passed up from inside the transport's hull. The khan reloaded, watching the alien forces fan out as they loosed pulse beams in all directions. Their defensive firepower, formerly a spattering shower aimed only at those who got too close, was intensifying into a blistering hail.

In the shadow of the perimeter wall, the obsidian Knight blasted itself upright with a close-ranged volley to its fallen victim's guts. Riding the recoil, it staggered drunkenly backwards in a half-circle, righting itself before clank-thumping another battle cannon shell towards the xenos warsuit hovering above. Its airborne foe twisted, letting the shell bounce from its torso with a dull thump. Its return fire blazed a stitching path of plasma bolts across the black walker's hull, overloading its ion shield and burning deep holes into its carapace.

The *Steelsteed* swerved hard, banking around the obsidian walker's legs to veer into the streets beyond. The khan whooped as the crenulated perimeter gave way to a triumphal parade ground with no less than five of House Terryn's

Knights stomping down it. Behind him the rest of the White Scars transports fanned out into arrowhead formation, the remains of their biker escort accelerating hard towards the evac zone.

The khan turned all the way around in the *Steelsteed's* cupola, thudding explosive bolts into the ochre-armoured alien tanks swerving in pursuit. A score of streamlined gunships hovered into view, their rectangular cannons cracking hypervelocity rounds into the walkers on the boulevard beyond. The khan heard the fizz of ion shield discharge over and over again, punctuated by the occasional clang of a solid impact.

Suddenly, there she was – a flash of white blurring high along the grey rockcrete at their flank. The xenos war leader, speeding on plumes of fire like a statue of some graven tech-daemon given life. She arced elegantly upwards, disc-like drones trailing in her wake, and loosed lengthwise fusion blasts into the Raven Guard manning the walls. Three of Severax's men burst into crackling cinders.

The khan plucked a krak grenade from his belt and flung it as hard as he could towards the xenos commander's back. Somehow she saw it coming, and she twisted in mid-air, connecting a perfect toe-punt before turning back to her prey. Kor'sarro was forced to duck as the krak grenade came in hard, detonating against the Rhino's roof with a deafening bang and a stink of fyceline.

Despite himself, Kor'sarro raised his eyebrows and nodded in grudging appreciation.

Engines growling, the White Scar transports gunned down the promenade until they passed through the iron wall of Terryn's walkers. Djubali passed right underneath the lead walker, the rest of the bikes behind him. At the other end of the boulevard, tau tanks and heavy battlesuits smashed railgun fire into the massive bulk of the Imperial Knights. The walkers returned fire, their battle cannons spitting shells at a rate that would make a Cadian tanker sick with envy.

'Captain Khan, glad you could make it,' voxed Patriarch Tybalt, his tone dry even as he loosed a blast of superheated air from his thermal cannon. 'Kindly board the drop-ship, or I fear that Master Severin will let neither of us forget it.'

Kor'sarro grunted his assent, waving his men up the yawning ramps of the drop-ships that awaited them in the triumphal plaza.

In the battle behind them, one of Terryn's Knights fell slowly backwards with a creak of protesting metal. Its impact on the flagstones of the boulevard was so heavy that the khan could feel the *Steelsteed* jump as if it had taken a direct hit. Another of the looming walkers burst into a thick pillar of flame as its inner core gave out, the stress on its ion shields killing it from the inside out.

A thick worm of guilt writhed in Kor'sarro's guts at the idea of leaving the

planet to the mercy of the tau, but he had little choice. Agrellan Prime stood on the brink of collapse, and if the hive-voxes told true, every other defensive position had already fallen to the tau.

Sudabeh seemed to sense his old friend's thoughts, and laid a gauntlet upon his pauldron as they debarked from the smoking hull of the *Steelsteed* into the shadow of the drop-ship's cargo bay.

'To linger here would be to sacrifice more lives on the altar of wounded pride, my khan,' said the Stormseer. 'Nothing more.'

Kor'sarro spat in frustration as his vehicles mounted the ramps of the evac zone, the surviving Catachans close on their tracks. Even the Knights of House Terryn that had been blocking the promenade had turned their mighty war machines around, ion shields flaring at their rears as they stamped towards the hangar bays of the drop-ships.

At the far end of the triumphal road, the giant tau warsuits that had blasted open Agrellan's defences hovered high. Speaker arrays slid out from their torsos to blare a message in accented but precise Imperial Gothic. As the piston ramps of the drop-ships closed with a hiss, the rumble of their engines slowly drowned out the broadcasts of the alien invaders.

Not quickly enough, for the khan's liking. The tau's message would ring in his ears for weeks to come.

'People of Agrellan Prime!' the speaker arrays called. 'Your protectors have abandoned you! Watch as your Emperor's finest warriors flee, leaving you to your fate. Yet that fate is kinder than you suspect! Throw down your arms, and the killing will cease immediately. We bring enlightenment, peace, and freedom from tyranny – yes, even freedom, blessed freedom from an Emperor that would bleed you white! We bring safety for you and your families, safety and boundless prosperity. Citizens, lay down your arms and listen, listen to the undeniable truth of the Greater Good...'

INTERLUDE 2-0

At the heart of the Raven Guard battle-barge *Wings of Deliverance*, the Sphere of Councils hung suspended by a thousand clanking chains. Built into the arched windows of the armoured sphere were baffles and dampeners that prevented the slightest whisper from getting out of its lead-lined walls.

Inside the strange construction was a toroid loop of polished bone. The names of the Chapter's heroes were inscribed upon it in tiny, spidery script. Ten figures stood around it, united in silence if not appearance. Each of their faces was cast in shadow by the candelabras dangling above. The atmosphere was thick with trails of verity-incense that wound around power-armoured Space Marine and uniformed human alike. The figures had been standing around the bone toroid inside the sphere for the best part of six hours.

'This is futile!' blurted Kor'sarro Khan, throwing his hands up for what seemed like the tenth time that day. 'There is simply no time for the waiting game. We must strike back at these upstart tau, finish what we started on Agrellan. Sever the head and the body will die.'

His words were met only with a stony absence of reply. Up in the dome above, a perched corvid cawed its ill omens.

'Perhaps...' said Chapter Master Severax, his sonorous tones resonating around the chamber, 'perhaps it is that same haste that has led us to this point, Captain Khan. A foe with the power of flight is not easily slain by an earthbound blade. We must strike unseen.'

'But even should we find a location for this ambush,' protested the khan, 'what guarantee is there that she will take the bait? That xenos b... the tau war-leader is highly intelligent. I want her head silvered and spiked on the walls of Quan Zhou, more than any other warrior in the Imperium. I swore an oath to do so. But she will not fall so easily to a base ploy. We must strike hard and true, before she has a chance to prepare. I favour aggressive warp translation, then a

killing strike.'

'Even if it were successful, khan, that would doom us all,' said Patriarch Tybalt, twisting his long goatee beard around a beringed finger. 'We cannot engage the tau armada in fleet-to-fleet combat and hope to prevail. Our best hope is to use their overconfidence against them. A warrior with a newly-forged sword is always keen to test the blade.'

'The old tortoise has a point,' drawled Colonel Straken, drawing cold daggers from the patriarch opposite. 'We're on the edge of their empire, here. That means their nearest strongholds are a good sight closer than ours.'

'So?' put in Sudabeh, his dislike of the Catachan plain.

'So we hit them hard, they hit us back even harder. This time they do it for keeps. They got old Agrellan sewn up good and tight, took the whole planet down in the space of a day. You're a fool if you think they didn't let us evacuate, all the better for their propaganda vids. You can bet your straggly beard on that. But if we lure them further into the Imperium, goad them into a trap, well... they won't be able to resist rolling out those shiny new suits for the pict-thieves. Spread them thin enough, cover the skies, and we can close them down.'

'We've been over this,' said Kayvaan Shrike, his fingers planted in the corners of his eyes. Wax dripped from one of the candelabras above him, but the shadow captain pivoted fast, and the trickle missed his power armour by a finger's breadth. 'All this strategy is of no use without a battlefield to enact it,' he said, setting his feet once more as the gloom surrounded him like a funeral shroud.

Severax stared hard at Tybalt, though only Shrike caught the meaning of the glare.

'Very well,' said the patriarch, testily. 'We shall use Voltoris herself as our castle, much as it pains me to suggest it. She is shielded from sight by the Damocles Gulf, though we can lead the foe there easily enough. With our fleet on the coreward side of the planet, we will give the impression that our portcullis is unbarred.'

The room lapsed into silence once more. Any world that stood in the path of the tau empire's relentless expansion would bear heavy scars indeed.

'But how will we know where the tau will strike, even if they do take the bait?' said Kor'sarro, his tone full of polite respect.

'Voltoris has but one city, Captain Khan,' Tybalt sighed. 'Furion Peak, seat of my throne, abode of my sons and grandsons and the pride of House Terryn. The rest of the land is either forest or desolate mountain range. Put simply, the planet has nothing else of consequence to conquer.'

There were murmurs from around the toroid. The khan shared a glance with Sudabeh before nodding his assent.

‘We set a snare at the peak, and wait for them to wander into it,’ said Kor’sarro. ‘I suppose that could work.’

‘Quite so,’ continued Tybalt. ‘Patience is the key. If we use Voltoris as bait, and we shall know the exact location of where they will aim their blade. The skies will tell us of the timing.’

Corvin Severax’s lips curled, the tiniest hint of gratitude tingeing his ashen features. Tybalt smiled back, though there was no mirth in it, and plenty of bitter steel.

‘Thank you for your offer, Patriarch Tybalt,’ said Severax. ‘On behalf of the Imperium, we recognise the sacrifice to come, and thank House Terryn for every life it gives.’

‘Thousands of my people will die, no doubt,’ said Tybalt, sighing heavily. ‘I suppose at least it’ll liven the place up a bit.’

Commander Shadowsun shut the iris door to her quarters behind her, glad of a moment’s respite. She splashed water on her face, rubbing her eyes hard before shuffling over to the concave egg of her bed. She was too tired to even take off her armoured bodyglove. She’d do it in a moment, she thought, lulled by the soft purr of the ship’s engines. Just a few minutes of rest first.

It had been so long.

Suddenly the side door that led into her war room hissed open. The Supreme Ethereal drifted through on a cushion of anti-grav, his robes of state billowing around him. Shadowsun shot out of her bed only to fall down once more into a skidding kneel, her head bowed as her mind scrambled to full alert.

‘O’Shaserra,’ boomed Aun’Va, the Supreme Ethereal every bit as real as the pooling hydration fluids that Shadowsun had spilled across the floor. ‘I find you ill-prepared for war.’

‘I offer contrition, master,’ she blurted, ‘I merely sought to meditate on a military phenomenon that disturbs me.’

‘Indeed. I have another matter for you to consider.’

‘Master?’ she said, eyes cast low.

‘The progress of our expansion throughout the Dovar System is on track once more, despite the setbacks you placed in its path. Our enaction of Mont’ka upon Agrellan was a resounding success. For this the empire thanks you. Scenes from the breaching of Agrellan Prime have been... optimised, and subsequently broadcast to every screen in the empire.’

‘I am honoured, master.’

‘Yet your work is far from done.’

‘I... I realise that to be the case, O Supreme One.’

‘You do not!’ said Aun’Va, his eyes wide. ‘You do not.’

He hovered over to Shadowsun’s meagre possessions and picked out a holosphere from amongst them, gazing idly at the images of himself that were projected from its faceted core. ‘I sense that my magnanimous decision to allow our foes to leave Agrellan gnaws at your warrior heart, my child. You wish to bring death to the barbarian war-leader you encountered there.’

‘You are as wise and perspicacious as ever, Supreme One.’

‘It is a matter to which I have given much thought.’ The Supreme Ethereal turned to Shadowsun, drifting over to where she knelt on the floor to loom above her. He spread his arms out at his sides, his robes of state floating around him. Though Shadowsun was still kneeling on the floor, she could feel his majesty filling the room.

‘I am allowing you a single chance to hunt down and destroy those who you allowed to escape, O’Shaserra. You will be given the necessary materiel to ensure their destruction. I have seconded half the fleet to the cause. The other half shall continue the pacification of the Dovar System under my guidance.’

‘Master, I swear to you that it shall be done,’ enthused Shadowsun, though inside of her something broke. ‘My thanks can never be sufficient.’

‘Indeed they cannot. You will repay my faith by destroying the gue’ron’sha and their allies as soon as they make planetfall, ending them one and all. Oe-kenyon will accompany you. Once this is done, you may return to the expeditionary fleet and attend me once more.’

‘Of course, master. I shall send out far-ranging surveillance drones with immediate effect. I long to leave, to enact Mont’ka upon our foes so that I may sooner return to your side.’

‘Then make your preparations immediately. I expect you to have mustered your cadres and launched your fleet before the dec is out.’

‘It shall be so, Supreme One,’ said Shadowsun, her head bowed so low she could smell the faint antiseptic whiff of her master’s hemmed robes.

‘Farewell, then, and may the Greater Good guide you,’ said Aun’Va, turning with stately grace to drift out of the iris portal that led to the main corridor and the Ethereal Guard that now waited outside.

Shadowsun stayed kneeling in supplication until the iris door hissed closed. Once she was certain she was alone, she let her forehead slowly cover the last few centimetres to the cool, hard floor.

Spume glittered diamond-bright as Voltoris’s verdigris sea lapped softly onto the shoreline. Wavelets rich in photosynthetic algae swilled onto the wet sands, and as they receded once more, iridescent crabs darted sidelong to feed on the tiny

shrimps. Barefooted children splashed and played near the waterline, laughing in joy as the crustaceans scuttled crazily between them. Far to the west, a kroktar hauled its tentacled bulk onto a shelf of flat stone, sunning itself in the infrared rays of the planet's crimson sun. The children shrieked at the beast's appearance, pointing and making finger-tentacles close to their faces.

The tallest of the children called out, his face stern as he pointed to his servoskull's chronometric. He motioned to the winding path that wound back through the thick forest. The smaller youngsters reluctantly gathered their little nets and headed into the verdant eaves, inspecting the prizes they would show their parents upon their return. The path wound up and up, avoiding the howler-dens and quagmires that dotted the forest that led to the Furion plateau.

Several kilometres away, a massive fortress pushed its towers high from its perch atop the peak. Forbidding and terrible to most, but a safe haven to the children making their way towards it.

The little group passed underneath the thick canopy and into the verdant gloom. They swung sticks they had recovered from the jungle path as they went, telling each other tall tales of terrible monsters and brave knights.

In the skies high above, a cluster of distant spaceships burnt their way across the firmament. Shooting stars to most, but death itself to the people of Furion Peak.

CHAPTER SIX

FURION DROPSITE MOURNFALL JUNGLE VOLTORIS

A dot appeared in front of the Voltorian sun, three smaller dots orbiting around it. This time, the commander and her drones shot from the heavens on contrails of fire, vengeful envoys from another world that bore only the message of death.

Shadowsun landed hard in the peaty earth of the Mournfall jungle. Mere seconds later her entire Firststrike cadre had mustered on her co-ordinates. Orca drop-ships lifted back up into low orbit, the fire warriors they disgorged forming up into disciplined phalanxes on the wide jungle road. Scores of Crisis suits hung in the air overhead, both of her Counterstrike cadres on sentinel duty as her ground forces deployed below.

Oe-ken-yon hovered in close, bobbing upward smugly.

‘Dataharvest complete, commander! Designation Imperial feudal world, human population approximate 7 million, apex...’

‘Be silent, Drone Commandant Oe-ken-yon,’ snapped Shadowsun. ‘I know what this world is, and I know where the foe have mustered. The gue’la clearly consider us so localised a threat they can skulk upon backwater worlds without fear of reprisal. They will pay a high price for their ignorance. We shall deliver the killing blow and leave before the sun is set.’

‘May I append my datacompile, commander?’

‘If you must, but I have more important duties to attend to at this moment. Speed can be a weapon too, drone commandant.’

‘As you say, Commander Shadowsun,’ said the drone, its elevation sinking as

it drifted away once more.

‘Shas’vre Draï, is your team ready for battle?’ said Shadowsun, spinning around hard to face the tree line.

‘Ah... yes, my commander,’ said Shas’vre Draï, emerging from the jungle in a shimmer of emerald light. ‘May I speak?’

‘You may. Make it quick.’

‘I see that you have deviated from your usual strategies in order to adopt Mont’ka, my commander.’

‘Continue with caution,’ she replied, her fusion blasters whining to full charge.

‘Ah... I also theorise that strategy could yield optimum results, though I have served alongside... alongside other commanders in my time. Timing is everything, as Commander Puretide taught us. The preparatory phase and the subsequent honing of this operation seems... perhaps... a little perfunctory?’ The stealth-suited veteran took two small steps back, his body language defensive.

‘We took extensive assessments of our prey upon Agrellan, Shas’vre Draï,’ said Shadowsun, her brow furrowed. ‘I have analysed them several times over. These are the very same warriors – if anything, they are fewer in number than predicted. All that remains is to enact the slaughter. Yet you quote Commander Puretide’s teachings, much as a teacher would to a novice. Do you intend to oppose me?’

‘No, my commander,’ said Draï, horrified at the very idea. ‘Your word is final!’

‘- - - HE LIES - - - HE SEEKS YOUR CROWN - - - SEND HIM TO HIS DEATH - - -’

Shadowsun snarled in irritation, but did not blink-push the autotrans away. No time to think about whatever inexplicable glitch had taken hold of her battlesuit on Agrellan. Not now.

Not when she was about to turn this green and peaceful world into a boiling cauldron of war.

The tau cadres swept along the mist-wreathed road, Shadowsun a shimmering white blur at their head. She was ready and willing to blast a breach in the fortress walls herself, if it came to it. Yet part of her would relish the sight of the Riptides in action once more. If they could blast open the perimeter wall of an Imperial hive city, they could certainly deal with the lumpen stone fortress that squatted on the plateau ahead.

The tower-capped stronghold reminded Shadowsun of the tales her dome-tutors had told her as a child. Tales of the Mon’tau, the time of terror, the great

darkness before the ethereals had brought the tau the light of a shared destiny.

In the dim prehistory of their race, the castes had been at war, and Shadowsun's hot-tempered predecessors had sought to tear down the castles of the builder tribes. Their primary settlement had been Fio'taun, a mountain plateau much like the one they were approaching along the misty jungle road. Atop it had been the mightiest of earthen citadels, a fortress long besieged by an alliance of fierce plains tribes and the winged tau of the peaks. Five long seasons her primitive ancestors had braved the cannons of the citadel atop the peak. Such wanton bloodshed. So many deaths, for so little reason.

Strange how the cycles of time revolved.

Something flashed in the jungle mists, a string of illuminations like will-o'-the-wisps in the distance. The autotrans bar slid unbidden into her helmet's viewscreen.

' - - - BEWARE LITTLE ICE MAIDEN - - - ' it spooled, ' - - - YOUR DOOM IS CLOSE - - - '

Crawling suspicion covered Shadowsun's skin, and she boosted one of the smaller audiobars that had sprung to life alongside the autotrans. There it was, the telltale whistle of solid ordnance.

'All castes crouch and shield your south!' she transmitted as widely as possible. 'The gue'la attack!'

As one, the fire warriors in the jungle road dropped to one knee and raised the large oblong plates of their shoulder armour to face the hard-packed road leading back the way they had come. A heartbeat later, the peaty earth was torn upwards in an ear-blasting string of explosions that echoed from the jungle eaves. Dozens of Shadowsun's rearguard were flung high into the air, their limbs ripped from their bodies. Here and there pulse rifles discharged random sprays of plasma as disembodied fingers clutched tight.

Shadowsun's sensor suite flared the trajectory of another incoming barrage, but this time it came down behind her rearguard. Just as she was turning to survey the damage the tree line erupted into life. Hundreds of pale gue'la brutes roared out from the jungle in crude but effective camouflage, many of their number crying out praise to the Imperium's dead god. As the tau reeled in surprise, more and more of the gue'la emerged from the mists from either side of the road, their rifles spitting laser blasts into fire warriors and battlesuits alike. Some of them charged headlong at the fire warriors hunkered down at the side of the road, drawing knives the length of a tau's arm and plunging them into the weak points of their armour.

One in every ten of the gue'la emerging from the trees carried a cylindrical tank of the volatile liquid the Imperials loved to employ so much. Cackling with

alien glee, the gue'la troopers sent whooshing clouds of flame into the ranks of the tau firing back at them. Whole crowds of noble fire warriors were caught in the deadly clouds and transformed into burning, flailing puppets. One Imperial soldier caught a pulse rifle volley in the chest, its bolts slamming right through his torso and igniting the tanks on his back with a loud *whooompf*.

The thick smoke of burning flesh mingled with the jungle mists, turning the ambush into a hellish confusion of half-glimpsed tableaux. Shadowsun boosted up high, blasting columns of energy into the hollering gue'la troopers wherever a clear shot appeared.

'Riptides, target the tree lines! Heavy burst cannon only! Rearguard, move in to engage at close quarters! For the Greater Good, engage!'

The XV104 battlesuits at the heart of the fire warrior phalanx stood inviolate in the chaos, each pivoting on their waist gimbals to level their arm cannons at a different section of the tree line. Nova reactors thrummed to full charge, the rotary whine of their multiple barrels in stark counterpoint. As one the Riptides opened fire, a bass *voh-voh-voh-voh* booming from their cannons. Thick cylinders of plasma scythed down trees and gue'la warriors alike in a storm of indiscriminate violence.

The blazing weapon systems panned back and forth across the tree lines, reaping a madman's toll on the gue'la platoons charging in. Here and there close-range las-fire picked at the Riptides to no more effect than light summer hail. Well-aimed krak grenades detonated against their joints, blackening paint but leaving the superstructure shining undamaged beneath.

The reactors that powered the battlesuits pulsed blue light into the mist as their rate of fire grew steadily higher. With a loud bang, something overloaded inside the Riptide closest to Shadowsun, a thin shriek coming from the battlesuit's shuddering torso as it vented a geyser of steam.

It was all the chance the gue'la needed. They swarmed up the giant's legs like arboreal simians, knives stabbing into the gaps between its armoured plates as their wiry fingers wedged into cracks. Shadowsun scythed past to cut two of them from the Riptide's back with a precision blast of fusion fire. Oe-nu and Oe-hei hurtled after her, Oe-nu ramming bodily into a third and pitching him from the Riptide with a crack of broken bone.

Curving upright once more, Shadowsun glimpsed a scar-ravaged gue'la with a glowering bionic eye climb up high on the malfunctioning Riptide. He plunged a metallic arm deep into the battlesuit's neck joint, rooting around before yanking half of a bloody tau head from the aperture he had torn in its metal hide. Shadowsun's stomach turned. She pivoted in mid-air in preparation to loose a blast right at the scarred gue'la, but the obscuring fog closed in around her once

more, hiding him from sight. Her meteorological readouts showed that the strange mist was thicker than any natural phenomenon had any right to be. She eye-flicked through her secondary perception modes. Sonar sight was next to useless with the crump of artillery fire so close by, and strange red lightning haunted the electromagnetic spectrum.

More gue'la mind-science.

'Counterstrike cadres! Open a path, pressing north!' she cried, her voice high above the confusion of battle. 'Oe-ken-yon, maximum altitude! Locate the area where visibility is poorest and append details as soon as possible!'

In the mists below, black-armoured gue'ron'sha hammered out from the mists on columns of blue fire, slamming into the stealth battlesuits that stalked the perimeter of the battle. Everywhere the Space Marines struck they bowled over their targets, each battlesuit's chameleon cells flickering a hundred colours at once as their owners slammed into the dirt.

There was no way Shadowsun could get a clear shot, especially as the stealth battlesuits were already recalibrating to disguise them against the mud. Their Space Marine attackers had them up close, a terrifying thought even to a veteran like Shadowsun. Chaintoothed swords sawed through elbow and knee joints in spurts of dark blood, lightning-sheathed talons ripped right through armour to carve apart the pilots beneath. Death-symbols flickered charcoal grey in her command suite. Crying out, Shadowsun loosed a blast that cored gue'ron'sha and victim alike as she hunted desperately for the orchestrators of the ambush.

An isometric plane opened in her sensor suite as Oe-ken-yon blipped an aerial view of the battle. She read it with one eye as the other traced a sword-wielding gue'ron'sha in the mists ahead. Her right-hand blaster tore his torso in two in a cloud of vaporising blood. The thickest part of the mist clouding Oe-ken-yon's isometric was at the road's edge. Somewhere in that vicinity was the gue'ron'sha elder, thought Shadowsun, the summoner of mists and wielder of mind-science. If he was the architect of the trap that had closed around them, then he would be the next to die.

Twisting to kick an oncoming gue'la flame-trooper back into the mist, Shadowsun eye-flicked through her recorder console's footage until she reached the battle at Blackshale Ridge. She isolated the elder with the raised staff, blink-pushing his silhouette into her ambient scan.

Less than a heartbeat later, her sensor suite blipped a lock.

Kor'sarro pounded through the mists towards the battle, Sudabeh chanting strange low syllables at his side. Though the khan was not accustomed to simply running into combat like a steedless stripling, their entire strategy hinged not

upon the sudden thrust of the spear, but upon a noose drawn tight with stealth and sorcery.

It felt strangely freeing. With no less a leader than the Chapter Master of the Raven Guard in command, he was better able to enjoy the primal thrill of the chase and the anticipation of the killing to come. Up ahead were Severax and Shrike, powering through the jungle shadows with controlled bursts of their shielded jump packs. Gloomy souls both, but by the Great Khan they knew how to spring an ambush.

The mists parted to reveal a knot of tau warriors. Those on the outside knelt to stab bolts of plasma into the Catachans rushing towards them from their flank. Making use of the distraction, Severax hit the xenos infantry like a Donorian fiend high on the scent of its own blood. His crackling talons slashed left and right to cut apart those tau he had not flattened with the sheer crushing weight of his charge. A second later Shadow Captain Shrike boosted up and over his master, plunging both lightning claws into the back of a battlesuit twice his size before ripping the thing into three pieces with a cruciform slash.

The khan laughed in exultation, activating Moonfang's power field and bringing it round in a waist-high slash to carve a pair of tau in half at the waist. One of their kneeling comrades blasted a point-blank volley right at his chestplate, knocking him back a pace and filling his flaring nostrils with the scent of burning ceramite. The tau warrior scabbled for a reload, his fingers shaking with fear. Kor'sarro cut him down with contemptuous ease.

Up ahead, the mist parted to reveal a trio of the massive warsuits they had encountered upon Agrellan. The closest of their number ceased stamping a Catachan into a mess of shattered bone and turned with a whirr of servomotors, its comrades following suit. Blue light poured from the barrels of their weapons as they levelled their cannons at the khan and his brothers.

Kor'sarro roared in denial and sprinted forwards, planting his foot on the helmet of the kneeling tau warrior and launching diagonally upwards. He bounced hard from the giant's cannon, forcing it wide just as the xenos pilot discharged it. The khan felt the violent backwash of the cannon's blast catch him in mid-air, slamming him upwards into its midsection. On instinct he grabbed the ring of armour at its waist, dangling with one hand as he fought to bring Moonfang to bear with the other. With his hair on fire and half-blind from the close-range explosion, the khan hacked at the giant's leg joints, spitting acid-laced blood onto its ochre hull.

As Kor'sarro sawed the point of Moonfang into the warsuit's hip joint it stuck fast, lodged deep in the ball of the articulated socket. Growling in frustration, the khan planted one armoured foot on his blade and used it to boost upward,

climbing hand over hand up the monster's torso. Stepping backward, the warsuit brought its shield arm in tight, smashing the captain so hard his nose broke upon its chestplate. The White Scar hung on regardless, spitting teeth. Heat boiled out of the vent on the side of the thing's torso, its backwash so intense that the white paint of his ceramite peeled away across a full half of his body. Barely a metre behind him the warsuit's cannon arm blazed blue, no doubt powering up to slay yet more of his battle-brothers.

Inspiration struck, and the khan swung his lower body across the chestplate as he grabbed a Krak grenade from his belt. Riding the momentum of his return, he pulled the grenade's pin with his teeth and reached out to slam it hard into the vent on his right. The impossible energies boiling out of the vent cooked the flesh of his fingers inside his armoured gauntlet, but the grenade stuck tight. Kor'sarro let go and kicked away from the xenos machine hard, rolling with the impact once his backpack slammed into the jungle road below.

The looming warsuit brought its cannon's muzzle to bear, the light of its barrel-slits blinding in its intensity. The khan dived sidelong into the corpse-strewn mud, grabbing a dead tau and raising its cadaver as a pathetically inadequate shield.

The tau machine's torso thrummed, screeched, and exploded in a fountain of blue-white light.

'Ha!' shouted the khan, 'Not so clever!'

The warsuit's explosion had burnt away much of the mist around it, revealing Severax and Shrike as they ripped into the second of the towering machines. With their jetpacks to keep them airborne the Raven Guard were pitiless and predatory in their attack, a pair of black hyperfelids mauling a savannah mammut. Sparks flew as they stabbed their lightning claws in and out of the warsuit's torso, seeking tau blood. Suddenly Severax cried in triumph and ripped open the machine's breastplate door. The pilot crouched inside looked pitifully vulnerable as the hissing mist of decompression revealed him to the world. Shrike swung under the thing's shield arm, punching a four-taloned claw deep into the pilot's chest before kicking away to find more prey.

As the khan worked Moonfang free from the remains of his own warsuit kill, the third of their number stomped in, shrugging shouting Catachans from its massive shoulders. Its heavy burst cannon cut down a trio of Raven Guard, scattering their remains bodily into the mist. To the khan's eyes the oncoming machine appeared to crackle, spidery red bolts playing over it from head to toe.

The psychic lightning intensified as the entire warsuit glowed red, disappearing with a thunderclap boom to leave nothing behind but the stink of ozone. Kor'sarro turned to look for Sudabeh. Sure enough he was striding

through the mist towards them, his eyes still glowing the colour of fresh blood.

‘Stormseer! You teleported it, brother!’ cried the khan in delight. ‘Where to?’

‘I have no idea,’ laughed Sudabeh.

The khan’s eyes creased as he raised his blade in a warrior’s salute.

Then Sudabeh burst apart in an explosion of superheated blood.

‘Mind-wielder neutralised,’ transmitted Shadowsun, launching backwards and away from the screaming war-leader that was firing his pistol at her from the jungle road. ‘All Crisis units, close on indicated position. I have located their leaders. Mont’ka is...’

Her words trailed off as the mist shrouding the forest stirred, thinned, and then dissipated completely.

Two columns of white gue’ron’sha vehicles were grinding along the shallow rivers on either side of the jungle road, their occupants deploying into the undergrowth and fanning out to cut off all routes of escape. A disaster in the making, but that alone, her cadres could have coped with. It was the sight on the road ahead that left her speechless.

Up on the plateau, the gates of the stone fortress had opened. A thirty-strong army of Imperial walkers was striding out towards them, the black-iron devil at their head.

‘All cadres, back to the dropsite!’ shouted Shadowsun, her mind whirling as she desperately sought a tactic or strategy that would see them safe. Even as she spoke, she saw that yet another Imperial army was moving into position, a phalanx of green gue’la tanks that were driving up the jungle road right where she had intended to rally. Fear’s cold claw closed on her throat; fear of failure, and of causing the unnecessary death of so many tau. They were trapped, she thought, her mind drifting from the battle around her to a point of abstract thought. Trapped in the final act of a masterfully disguised Kauyon.

A tide of self-loathing rose within Shadowsun as she realised she had fallen for the same strategy she had used upon her foes a hundred times and more. She forced herself to focus, blink-pushing mute the screams of her dying comrades so she could think straight.

‘Cancel that last command,’ she transmitted. ‘Manta wings, rapid insertion forces, reinforce and clear the indicated dropsite of enemy operatives. Concentrate fire on the outermost tanks, congest and deny mobility wherever possible. All battlesuits to stay airborne, but without ascending within view of inbound gue’la walkers.’

She eye-flicked details onto Oe-ken-yon’s latest isometric, turning her

attention back to the metal goliaths pounding down the jungle road towards her.

Suddenly a pair of blunt-nosed shells whistled past her, each larger than her torso. Three more thundered over the canopy scant metres from her position, detonating amidst a knot of Crisis battlesuits and forcing the survivors to hunker down low. Shadowsun too dropped like a stone, touching down in the blood-slick peat of the jungle eaves. A dome of ruby energy crackled around her as Oehei intercepted a lasgun shot aimed for the back of her head. She whipped round, her fusion blasters whining high as her targeting reticules sought a gue'la to kill.

Her cross hairs glowed gold over a small human female clutching a tattered net like a blanket. Glittering crustaceans crawled at her feet as she mouthed something too quiet to hear.

' - - - ARE YOU THE STAR PRINCESS - - - ' the autotrans spooled.

'I'll have your head, you xenos hag!' shouted Kor'sarro, barrelling off the forest road. His augmented sense of smell could pick out the dry clay tang of his foe's fusion weapons even over the foul bouquet of battle. She would die at his hand yet.

A glimmer of distorted light and a patch of pale cloth caught the khan's eye to the right. He stormed towards the undergrowth like an enraged bull, the trophy-skulls on his power pack catching at the looping vegetation of the boughs above. It made no difference. Nothing could have kept him from his quarry then. Her head would be his.

Sure enough, there she was – the xenos witch, blurred in outline but frozen in place in front of some foolish Terryn child that had chosen the wrong day to stray. Moonfang raised high, the khan launched himself headlong at his prey only to clang hard against an invisible wall and bounce back into the trunk of a twisted tree.

A shimmering outline blurred in front of his vision for a second. 'Surprise,' the shimmer said in accented Gothic, putting a multi-barrelled cannon to the khan's head.

Shadowsun came to her senses in time to see the human war-leader dive to one side, tucking and rolling as Shas'vere Draï blasted the trunk behind him into splinters. Nimble despite his size, the gue'ron'sha warrior came up into a crouching run, outdistancing Draï's volley as it carved through the foliage. The war-leader caught the small human female around the waist and hurled her into a thicket of bushy flora. Shadowsun took a double shot as soon as the diminutive human was clear, but the human warrior's own force field glittered bright, absorbing the fusion blasts with an ultrasonic ring of protest.

Drai stomped forwards, his burst cannon blazing balls of plasma. The warrior turned his armoured shoulder to deflect the volley and shot blind with his bolt pistol once, then twice. The first of the bolts ricocheted from Drai's armoured mantle. The second punched right through his lens array and detonated within his brain.

As Shas've Drai slumped to the floor, the gue'ron'sha warrior launched himself right towards Shadowsun, silvered sword swinging hard. Appalled by the sudden death of her friend, she stumbled backwards with her firing impulses at maximum.

Both her fusion blasts went wide.

Just as the massive warrior slashed a mighty backswing at Shadowsun's neck the battle flashed monochrome, the jungle lit starkly for the space of a single searing moment. Oe-nu dropped out of the canopy and fell smoking to the earth. Driven by the weight of rage and grief, the swordblow would have taken Shadowsun's head had Oe-nu not pumped every iota of its power into her personal forcefield.

Even so the human warlord's sword landed a telling blow. Its cruel edge carved deep into Shadowsun's breast, opening the muscle of her heart and smashing her backward into the mulch.

The last thing she saw as her lifeblood pulsed onto the jungle floor were blazing angels silhouetted against the Voltorian sun.

EPILOGUE

‘Awaken her,’ said Aun’Va, his serene expression tainted with distaste.

The thick-set earth caste scientists bowed low, hurrying to impart the correct chemical balance to Shadowsun’s recuperation pod. A data strip at the side of the pod flashed copper, then gold. A string of numbers blipped across its front as it hissed open in a cloud of condensing air.

‘O’Shaserra,’ boomed the Supreme Ethereal, ‘The time for sleep is past.’

Commander Shadowsun slid one eyelid sideways, then the other, blearily struggling to focus on the figure in front of her.

‘Oh,’ she slurred, ‘It’s you.’

An awkward silence blossomed. The earth caste attendants turned quickly away.

‘Given your condition, I shall forgive that lapse of protocol,’ said Aun’va.

‘You may seek atonement for your slip at a future date.’

‘Whatever you say,’ croaked Shadowsun, her long-unused voice difficult to read even for an ethereal. ‘Please, tell me one thing before we proceed. What was the fate of the Voltoris expedition?’

‘Unmitigated disaster, my child,’ said Aun’Va gravely. ‘Eight hundred and twelve tau lives were lost to the gue’la’s guns before extraction was complete.’

‘And yet... and yet I still live?’

‘For now,’ said Aun’Va. ‘I understand your reinforcement cadre was able to wound your gue’ron’sha assailant to the point of neutralisation.’

There was another long silence. Shadowsun’s eyes were cast down, the Supreme Ethereal unable to see the depths of sorrow that pooled there.

‘The shame of your defeat is difficult to erase, O’Shaserra, if not impossible. Yet the empire shall prevail. The Dovar expedition proceeds as planned, and the earth caste assure me that you will be at maximum operational efficiency within a single kai’rotaa. It seems the Greater Good still has use for you.’

‘Then I shall serve it,’ said Shadowsun, a measure of conviction returning to her voice.

‘You shall, until death.’

Shadowsun set her jaw firm as if to receive a blow. ‘Will I be subjected to the Malk’la ritual for my failure?’

‘I have not yet decided. I shall seek the counsel of Aun’Shi. In the ways of war, he is more learned even than I.’

‘A wise choice.’

‘Of course it is, my child. Now, I sense a matter disturbs your soul, a matter that keeps you from realising your true potential. This conflict must first be resolved if you are to defeat your foes and retake your rightful place at the head of the Third Sphere expansion.’

‘What matter is it to which you refer?’

The Supreme Ethereal paused, cocking his grey head to one side by an almost imperceptible amount before answering.

‘Let us speak of the Traitor Shoh.’

BROKEN SWORD

Guy Haley

CHAPTER ONE

Recording 7-9998-14 Gue'vesa. Institute of Human Affairs, Lui'sa'loa, Bork'an. Retrieval code 14a-159. Personal memoirs of Gue'vesa'vere Dal'yth J'ten Ko'lin, gue'vesa auxiliary diplomatic protection la'rua 8448.

This is all about Skilltalker.

I've been asked to record this as honestly as I can, so I will. I don't think you're going to like everything I'm going to say, or I don't think you would if you weren't all so damned sure of yourselves. Probably you won't listen to those parts, or you'll discount them. I'm only a gue'la after all, and a first generation one at that.

I'm recording this in Gothic. I've not had the vocal surgery yet, so I'm afraid my Tau'noh'por will be as senseless as it would be offensive to listen to.

Okay. Let's begin. I am Gue'vesa'vere Dal'yth J'ten Ko'lin. In another life, I was, and still am to myself and among the other human auxiliaries... the gue'vesa – I mean – Jathen Korling. I was originally of Gormen's Fast, now G'men in Ksi'm'yen Sept, but all that's behind me now.

This is my testimony.

Firstly, Por'el Bork'an Kais Por'noha – Skilltalker – was my friend. I'm still cut up about his loss, more than I am about my team, if I am to tell the truth. But that's what you want, right, the truth? I'm uneasy about this. Telling the truth back in the Imperium was often a good reason to get killed. You'll have to forgive me if I appear hesitant, but as you have been so good as to trust me, then I suppose I can only return the favour and hope for the best.

You say we are given a choice. You know as well as I do that there is no choice. My choice was given to me while I was slowly bleeding to death on Gormen's Fast. A kroot rifle blade had cut clean through my femoral artery. Everyone else from my platoon was dead. I'd got a tourniquet on it but I didn't

have long, and already the kroot were starting to feast on the dead. I tried not to watch that, but the noises...

I figured, you know, that was it. I was done for. Praise the Emperor, long live the Imperium of Man, goodbye Captain Jathen Korling.

The shas'vere of the warrior team that had blasted half my men to shreds called the kroot off, they checked the dead, found me. Medical support was there within seconds. The medic must have seen my stripes because a few minutes later there was Skilltalker, giving me the Greater Good chapter and verse while a bunch of earth caste patched me up. I cut through what he was saying, I was dog-tired, used up; half dead, in point of fact. I'd been put on the front to die – a shield for the high-brass, only they'd died and I hadn't. I'd had enough of high words to last me a lifetime.

He was patient, and took my interruption with good grace.

'I betray the Imperium for your Greater Good,' I said. I'd heard how it worked. I'd seen tau tech openly for sale, even seen a couple of the water guys roaming about Mainstreet unopposed. I'd heard about the planets that surrendered without a shot. I'd also heard that the tau killed everyone that didn't throw in with them. Enslaved those that did, sometimes murdered the willing anyway. You'll forgive me again, I'm sure. Honesty, yeah? This is what we were told, you're xenos scum, worst of the worst, that make traitors of honest men. 'What if I don't?'

Skilltalker smiled, showing me his big square teeth. Such an expressive face, he had. You're stolid to us, you know that? Most of you wrinkle your noses when you're happy, and shas'la always look kind of pissed off, but other than that you tau don't do facial expressions. I've had all the careful lectures about how aliens can't appreciate the Tau'noh'por, the concern that comes with that lack of understanding. I don't think you realise that you're condescending, unaware of your own limitations. Sure, even after they resculpt my vocal cords, I'm never going to manage the threefold stances of subtle disharmony, no matter how many times you make me dance through it. I can't differentiate between the fourteen tones. Fine. Come back and tell me off when one of you can wink.

Skilltalker was different. All the por'la have such telling faces, but Skilltalker was different even from them. There was such warmth and humour to him. I... I miss him, you know?

'Then you may die with honour,' he said to me.

This wasn't a threat. I think he could tell he had me already. He said this with a real twinkle in his eye, like we were in on a joke together.

Death or life. It's never a real choice, is it? Not for the sane. 'Where do I sign?' I said. He laughed. That was a noise I was going to appreciate as time

went on. He loved life, Skilltalker.

I was carried off on a stretcher by the fio'la. As I was lifted up, I saw I was being carried right past a line of other scared, wounded men who'd just watched one of their officers turn his coat at the drop of a medpack, and that was that. Skilltalker was giving his lecture to them as they pushed me into the transport. I don't think a single one said no. You are not a stupid people, I'll give you that.

I was relocated to Dal'yth, along with a lot of other Fasters. I'm not complaining. Good luck turning it around, I say. You're welcome to it.

I've been back here on Dal'yth these last five months... a half tau'cyr, convalescing. They've got me working alongside the water caste in the acclimatisation programme, dealing with new commonwealth citizens relocated from across the Damocles Gulf. I watched the gue'la coming in from Mu'gulath Bay. Pale, half-starved, terrified. Watching their fear go is the most remarkable thing. Watching their amazement grow is the second most remarkable thing. I thought Gormen's Fast was a dump, but compared to the hives of Agrellan, it was okay, and this place is a paradise.

You give us all a choice, but there really is no choice, not a real one. I know that.

I remember when Hincks got it, gunned down by those swine outside of Hive Chaeron. I went to see his widow a few days ago. Nice place she's got now. Good support from the sept authorities. Hincks's kids are growing up to be model citizens. His boy says he wants to go into the gue'vesa auxiliaries like his uncle Jathen. He's a healthy lad, tall and strong. I can't help think what kind of life he'd have back on Gormen's Fast. Probably be half-blind from working in the gossamer plants. Or dead. And yet there he is, cared for and fed and as strong as an ambull calf. Remarkable.

I'm still waiting for the catch.

CHAPTER TWO

Whenever I think about those last days with Skilltalker, my mind always goes back to the Devilfish, when we were on our way to Chaeron. An Imperial transport is crowded, dirty. Usually stinks. They're always hot. It's like they weren't built for people at all. A Devilfish is not like that. You'll never know unless you ride in a Chimera. I hope you don't, for your own sake, because you'll be going nowhere good. The Imperium treats aliens a lot worse than you do.

We were on Agrellan – Mu'gulath Bay, before it was Mu'gulath Bay. At that time I'd been attached to the diplomatic corps for five months. It had been twenty months since I'd taken up the generous offer of joining the efforts of the Greater Good. I'd seen a lot of things I'd never thought I'd see in that time; most of it good, but not all of it. I'll never forget Colonel Boroth of the Ossoun planetary defence force lining up for battle and then ordering his entire army to throw their weapons down to the sound of trumpets. He didn't lose a single man.

But I'll also never forget the descent of the hunter cadres onto Thelion IV when they said 'no'. The dead there...

On the face of it, the Tau'va, for me... It looked good. It is good. Not just in the civilian side, but in the military. Gone was my temperamental hand-me down lasgun. We had pulse carbines. Weapons worth a damn, and armour! Plating that actually, might just conceivably stop a shot. And the comms, vox equipment to make a Space Marine envious, for me! Those toys were mighty tempting to a lot of us; some of my squad had come over precisely because they were hungry for tau tech. Or because they were afraid of it.

We were an odd little collection. Hincks, from Gormen's Fast, like me, only a few hours left to live. Goliath, we never did get him to tell us his real name, but he was big enough for the one he'd chosen, and that was good enough for the rest of us. A pirate once, or so I heard. Holyon Spar, who swore he'd run away

from a rich family of rogue traders, but whose word couldn't be trusted on anything else, so I didn't trust him on that either. Helena, who came from some mudball agri world I'd never heard of that had been conquered half by accident.

And then there was Othelliar. He said he was from a human world never brought into the Imperium, until one day the fleets of the Master of Mankind had showed up, they say they're not interested in the light of the Emperor and all that, and that was that for his home. He hated the Imperium, I mean really, really hated it. I've seen fanaticism before. I'm not talking about the way you tau defer to the aun; that's instinctual, I can tell. I'm talking about fanaticism by choice. Because if there's one thing we humans do have over you – in most circumstances at least – it's choice. Mad priests, unbending officers, officials blindly following orders... They all choose to do those things, the Emperor alone knows why. But Othelliar's hatred of the Imperium, well, that was something else entirely. It scared me. He was too far gone with rage. Unstable. I'd mentioned this a few times to my superiors, but I'd been gently fobbed off with 'every sentient must be allowed a chance to shine,' and 'we all contribute to the Greater Good in the best way we can.' I feel like a fool now.

There we were. Skilltalker's protection detail. Humans chosen to visit humans with the water caste – this was all plainly explained to me – to show that there really was nothing to fear from the Tau'va. With us was Krix – what we called him, it was as far as we could get with his name. A kroot warrior, and Skilltalker's bodyguard. Yeah, I know he was there to protect him from us as much from the enemy. We were a calculated risk, after all. What was there to stop us bolting for home when we were deep in enemy territory? That's the thinking. If you've ever lived on an Imperial planet, you'd know that wasn't going to happen. Also in the back with us there was Fior'la Bork'an Bue'lai. Bu. A tech demonstrator, show the natives some shiny beads, impress them with the superiority of the tau cause. Sometimes there were others with us, sometimes there were not. It all depended on the mission. This was a dangerous mission, and so the usual assortment of other hangers-on were not present. The bare minimum embassy. Privately, I didn't rate our chances much. But Skilltalker was all smiles and polite chatter with all of us – each in our native dialect of Gothic, of course.

He was never scared. I remember, I asked him once if he was ever frightened. He wrinkled his nose at me and made that bubbling sound that passes for laughter in the tau.

'J'ten,' he said. He always used the tau version of my name, even though he could pronounce the human perfectly. He was making a point, except, well... except for that once. 'What is there to be afraid of?' he said. 'We go where we

are directed for the needs of society. If I were to die, then it would be for the Greater Good. That is all I ask from my life, to further our glorious cause.'

I looked at him dubiously. He grabbed my shoulders with his wide fingers and peered into my eyes, his face an exaggerated copy of human concern. I couldn't look back for too long, and looked away. Tau eyes are so big and dark. I'm afraid I'll not be able to look away. Sometimes... sometimes I think I can see stars in them. Sounds stupid, but it's the truth.

'You do not quite understand yet, friend J'ten. I can see that. You are motivated still by self-interest. Only when one forgoes the need to further one's own goals, to put behind them the need to satisfy their own desires, can one truly achieve one's greatest potential...'

'Unity with the polity through service of the polity, for the Greater Good. Tau'va,' I finished for him.

He smiled and chuckled again, shaking my shoulders slightly raffishly. There was something mischievous about him. It's why I liked him, I suppose. 'You see! You know it. You know it, friend J'ten! Only by believing it will you know true satisfaction.'

'I don't think I'll ever fully grasp it. Forgive me,' I said. I was mindful of my words. Back then, our friendship was only slowly growing. He was my superior. He was an 'el, I only a 'la. I've never got over it. Even if I ever am made a gue'vesa'el, same rank as he was, I think I'd probably feel the same. First among equals, and all that; tau come first. I can't quite shake that conquered feeling.

He put his tongue out through his teeth and hissed through the gaps. That was my first inkling that he and I were getting to be friends. He had stopped mimicking purely human expression around me, and behaved, just a little, more like a tau. 'Do not worry. Your children will understand, and that is all we ask of you. That and your loyalty.'

'You have that, Por'el Skilltalker, I swear,' I said. If for no other reason than if I'd have gone back to the Imperium, I'd have been shot.

You know, him mentioning children, gets me thinking about it, remembering it now. I'd like to have children some day. Never thought I would, but the Tau'va is a better place for them than the Imperium ever could be, and that's got me hankering after the family life. And then I think on this; Skilltalker once told me that breeding outside of each caste is forbidden. And I wonder, how long until this rule applies to humans, how long until our best characteristics are bred true like they are in grox? And in tau.

You asked me to be honest. Our culture's sacrosanct, so I'm told. Pair-bonding, family units, freedom of choice in our spouses, the works. I've seen that honoured. But I also think on Hincks's kid, all full of the Greater Good.

How far will he go, or his children, in embracing your ideals? You won't need to push much. We're mutable culturally, we humans. How much, I wonder, sometimes late at night, do you really want of us?

That conversation was months before the mission. By the time we were coasting at treetop height over the petrified forests of Agrellan, I was a 'vre, and Skilltalker and I had taken to socialising together. We were on our way to Hive Chaeron. Each of the twelve hives was getting a little visit from water caste – lay down your arms, embrace the Greater Good. No harm will come to you. Blah blah. Chaeron was our mark. This was a few days before O'Shaserra's killing blow, but everyone always gets one last chance to surrender. That's the way you play it.

The Devilfish. Quiet enough to talk in. The engines hum. It's cool. We're comfortable. Marvellous technology. Bu told me quite a lot about how it all works before he got reassigned. As much as I could understand anyway. It's hard for me. I still half-believe in machine-spirits. Although I understand it's all nonsense now, it's hard to shake the faith. You'll have that problem with a lot of us. Human culture is irrational, I've been told. But I'm not so sure everything we believe is so irrational. I'll tell you something. Agrellan – Mu'gulath Bay – is not a good planet. Something happened there, something really bad. All we gue'vesa could feel it, like a shadow on us. I could taste it, practically, in some places. The creatures in the forests, the forests themselves... It's not a natural place, not entirely. I heard the Nagi wouldn't come down there at all. But the tau? You're oblivious to that kind of thing. So don't lecture me quite so hard on the irrational. There's something *there*. I know it, even if your kind can never feel it.

Looking at my team in there, I had a foreboding that something wasn't quite right, I think. We had our helmets off, everyone was checking their weapons, standard drill. We barely had anything in common. Different dialects, different worlds, except me and Hincks, that is. Different morphology even: skin, height, eyes, hair. Like I say, humanity's a diverse race, us there in that back of the Devilfish? We were practically a fio'la biologist's dream sample.

I was thinking about ta'lissera. Ta'lissera indeed, Skilltalker wouldn't stop badgering me about it. But what could have bound us together? We were too different, I told him. We'd come from too many worlds, from too many nightmares.

I kept saying this to Skilltalker, and he'd kept asking me to think about it. Ta'lissera, that is. It seemed important to him that we bond, even though the Shas'ar'tol had made it clear to us all the bonding ritual – any bonding ritual – was only to be undertaken if we wanted to do it. Our culture was not tau culture,

they made that clear. We could take what we wanted and ignore what we didn't like, except, of course, the Tau'va.

'That, friend J'ten, is why they were chosen, precisely because of their differences,' he'd said. We'd been in a Kor'Shutto on the way to the front. The Damocles Gulf is heavily fortified after the heroic defence of Dal'yth. It was a defence installation first and foremost, but they did have a bar. We were in it. They served a passable imitation of human ale. He took a whey drink. Always made him a bit tipsy, eager to talk, even more so than normal. 'Do you think it is coincidence that these people are here together under your command. You are their gue'vre. Think of how the problem is for our own ethereals. Many aliens, some divided into many cultures, and the many septs of the tau.' He closed his hands around one another. 'But you see? Each of my fingers is a different finger, but they all work for the good of the greater organism – me. And I...'

'Work for the Tau'va.'

He mockingly saluted me with his drink. Once, the cheesy smell of it had made me gag, but I'd got used to it, like I've got used to so much else.

'I see great things for you, gue'vre. This is one of many challenges for you. You must mould this la'rua, and make them one. Each element individual yes, and so they should remain! But individuals each working for the common cause.'

'So together we might better serve the Tau'va.'

He smiled. 'You have it!' Then he realised the full meaning of my expression and tone. An expert on human affairs, Skilltalker, but sometimes slow on the uptake. Sarcasm was a tough one for him, you're all so damn sincere. Even the por can never be the races they mimic so well. It's their biggest weakness. 'Why this, this, this...' He drummed three broad fingers on the table. Cynicism is not a concept that the tau have. I supplied the word.

'Cynicism! Ah, yes.' He was delighted and became annoyed again. 'The Tau'va is not for the Tau'va's sake! This you do not understand. The Tau'va is for my good,' he pointed at my chest, 'and it is for your good. The Greater Good means you, me, the fio servers here, the nicassar, thraxians, kroot... Whomever you care to name. All who embrace it serve, and all who serve it are served by it, yes?'

He seemed pleased with himself, as he often did after one of his little lectures. The beer got the better of me.

'Permission to speak my mind, por'el?'

'Yes, yes! By all means, friend J'ten! You should always say your thoughts. How else are we to work together properly?'

'You are patronising, you know that?'

He understood patronising all right, and was offended. ‘I do not mean to be.’

‘No problem.’ I took another drink. It was getting late. In one k’un’cyr the lights would dim and we would be ushered off to bed. ‘This is why you’re so keen for me to make my team bond.’

He shook his head and bared his broad teeth. Grazer’s teeth, I always think of them. ‘No, no, no J’ten! Not make. Just do. Or do not. It is your choice, but I do believe that if you do undergo a ta’lissera, it will be better for you all.’

‘To fit in?’

‘You are impossible.’ He muttered to himself and rolled his shoulders with exasperation. Amid his melodic, glottal stream of Tau’noh’por I caught, ‘Fu’llasso.’

I laughed. ‘A mind knot? Don’t tell me I’m getting to you finally.’

‘Ah! Your Tau’noh’por improves,’ he said. ‘You are an example, J’ten! You are ready to embrace our culture more than some of the others. It will only benefit us to have you more properly committed to our vision. And it will benefit you, it is the superior way after all.’

I didn’t want to disagree. We were quiet a space. A chime sounded. The third shift would come to an end soon. The air caste had assigned third shift to us as our activity group. They expected us to sleep now. Already another group would be waking to start their day. The space stations of the air caste are crowded.

‘So, have you?’ he said at length.

‘What?’ I said, feigning ignorance.

He wasn’t going to be put off. ‘Chosen a ta’lissera. Surely there must be something acceptable in your culture that will stand. An oath-swearing, or celebration.’

There was, but I hadn’t. I’m not sure why I put it off so long now. A streak of stubbornness? Not wanting to subsume myself into tau culture entirely? Was I clinging to my old identity a little too hard? I don’t know. ‘No,’ I said. ‘No I haven’t.’

‘What are you thinking about, boss?’ Goliath asked me in his guttural Gothic, bringing me back suddenly into the present of the Devilfish. His pulse carbine looked laughably small in his hands. The earth caste had given us weapons specially constructed for human physiology, but with Goliath they’d hit the upper limit of the size range.

‘Nothing, I said. Nothing at all.’ I glanced at my mission clock. ‘Suit up people! Five minutes to dust off.’

When I caught Skilltalker’s eye, he was smiling. He knew what I was thinking about. I’m sure about that.

CHAPTER THREE

Report of Nagi'o Joauuulliallo, third level synaptic adjudicator of nagi synchronous collective 45978. Direct cranial engagement interrogation. Subject gue'ron'sha of semi-autonomous Imperial Uash'o 'Raven Guard', Tio've Six, Kau'ui Three.

[Supplementary note : The nature of the 'Space Marines' is well known to us, but we of the nagi 45978 synchronous collective were surprised by this subject's resilience to the mind rip nevertheless. We have ascertained that this is partly owing to the latent capability to interface with multiple dimensional realities present in all gue'la to lesser or greater degree, but the greater part of our difficulty originated from the subject's extensive psychological conditioning. The requisitioning of two lesser collectives was required to break through the subject's mental blocks. Despite our overwhelming mental superiority, the subject remained defiant to the end, resulting in the deaths or terminal disjunction of all members of one of the lesser collectives (may they find ultimate joining beyond the membranes of activity). Many memory artefacts are present in this interrogation report, but we were able to extract much audio-visual information concerning Imperial gue'la tactics and organisation. That they are so heavily factionalised was the chief surprise to our water caste and n'deemi intelligence experts. We nagi humbly submit that this is encouraging news, surely so divided and decrepit an empire, no matter its size, cannot hope to stymie the efforts of the glorious Tau'va in this critical phase of the Third Sphere Expansion.]

I am Brother-Sergeant Herek Cornix of the Raven Guard. I am Brother-Sergeant Herek Cornix of the Raven Guard. I am...

I am aboard the *Wings of Deliverance*. I go to a meeting with my Chapter

Master, Corvin Severax, my lord and my leader. I would do anything, should he command it. I am aboard...

I am not aboard the *Wings of Deliverance*. This is a trick. Get out of my mind. Get out, get out! I am Brother-Sergeant Herek Cornix of the Raven Guard, and you will not break my will!

[At this point, more pressure was applied. Earth caste enhancement machines were engaged in greater number. Several of them burned out, killing a full half of the lesser second collective before we were able to break into the inner spaces of the subject's mind.]

I... I am aboard the *Wings of Deliverance*. We are in orbit around hive-world Agrellan, the principal planet of the Dovar System, far from the sacred grounds of Terra, yet strategic, for it commands the Dovar Gap through the Damocles Gulf. Xenos contest it, and their temerity will not go unpunished. We of the Raven Guard come here to mete out such punishment as we deem fit. The battle-barge rumbles with repeated broadsides and weapons impact. Enemy rounds penetrate our void shields every so often, but so vast is the *Wings of Deliverance* that it is untroubled and sails on.

I am Herek Cornix, and I go to see my lord. We are arrived but lately in the system, and I am called into his presence first. This is an honour.

I wear my armour. This is right. Sable, emblazoned with the white emblems of my order. It is newly repainted with the badges of my deeds and rank, and freshly polished. We are at war. We must be ready at all times. It is said by the shadow captains that the enemy we fight has a degree of honour uncommon in xenos, that they are likely to give us fair warning before attacking in order to offer us terms. But this is our way, all done in accordance with the Codex Astartes. We stand ready at all times.

I pass through the great spinal way of the *Wings of Deliverance*. The blast shields are closed, but as I ride the transit way to the bridge complex, I see Agrellan below us through one open spotting cupola. It is a vile planet, tainted by long-ago war. Its atmosphere is poison to human beings, its forests grim places full of mutated wildlife. The lingering effects of a virus bomb, I am told, and something darker. Weapons fire sparkles around it as our picket ships duel with tau interdiction vessels. We have taken them by surprise. Elements of the first reinforcement fleet are hurrying to our aid from out-system. But the tau are many, and although our might is such that we can hold them back, quick judgment suggests that we cannot do so indefinitely. I wonder therefore, what our strategy will be. I am proud that I, before all others, will discover exactly

what Lord Severax has planned.

I reach the support block bearing the bridge complex. I am allowed through by our Chapter Master's honour guard. The atrium is vast and pleasing to the eye. Statues of heroes of our Chapter stand in solemn repose in the shadows. Their names are mysterious, known only to those who should know. This is as it should be. Ours is the way of the shadow war.

I am directed by servitors to one of many grand elevators. The doors, decorated with great skill by our serf-artisans, are inlaid with jet and polished coal, depicting a great raven, head down and wings crossed across its breast. Now I near the presence of my lord, my hearts quicken. Few are invited into the presence of Lord Severax, but I, Herek Cornix, have been granted this honour. Whatever the reason, I swear that I will prove worthy of the task set me. I will not shame myself.

The elevator takes long minutes to ascend the main support to the bridge complex. The *Wings of Deliverance* is our mightiest vessel, a battle-barge of great age. I am humbled by its majesty.

At the top I am met by members of the Shadow Conclave, our lord's most trusted servants. They lead me silently along hushed ways. We pass the great doors to the primary bridge. They lead me upwards on sweeping stairs, and usher me into the personal audience chambers of my lord.

The space is great, made all of dark stones and blackened iron. Nevertheless, the presence of my Lord Severax fills it utterly, from shadowy corner to gloomy embrasure.

Severax sits upon a dark throne of onyx, the black chalcedony. Subtle bands of white compete with the hard highlights of the throne's carvings to confuse the eye. Much of his face is lost to darkness, yet I look upon it! He is a living idol to our lost primarch. He is a true son of Corax. His skin is as white as pale stone, his hair as black as jet. His eyes are penetrating and black. His nose is aquiline – features we all bear, but he is flawless where the rest of us are as yet half-formed. Four hundred years of war have beaten the impurities out of him, as the impurities are beaten from the blade upon the anvil of the smith. He is our exemplar. He is the Raven.

Shadow Captain Kayvaan Shrike is present. I am surprised to see him, as he has been most active on the surface, bringing relief to our embattled brethren from the White Scars Chapter. With him also are an Adeptus Mechanicus magos, his red robes embroidered with the badges of the biologis sect. Beside him stands an inquisitor I do not know and have not seen before. This is no surprise; their methods are even more secretive than ours. He is old by the standards of the ungifted, but his bearing is full of strength. His hand rests within the basket

hilt of a power rapier, his off-white clothes the only sign of lightness in the chamber's gloom. Cybernetic pseudoravens flap overhead, cawing and whirring. Otherwise the chamber, its galleries and broad floor fit to host half the strength of our Chapter, is empty.

'We greet you, Brother-Sergeant Cornix,' says Shrike to me. Severax does not speak. He sits and looks at me, the black coins of his eyes unreadable.

I fall to one knee, the metal of my battleplate clunking on the black granite paving. I bow my head.

'I am honoured to be called to the presence of our Lord Corvin Severax,' I say.

'Rise, brother-sergeant. Time is short,' says Shrike.

I comply... I...

I am not aboard the *Wings of Deliverance*! I...

[A flash of a dirty room in a city of metal. A mother's face. A father's sorrow. The sound of machinery is constant. The cry of young. Small spaces divided by dirty cloth. Danger is everywhere, the air smells of smelting and harsh chemicals. A young gue'la runs through dark streets, his feet swift, his eyes ever on the dark round of the moon looking down on his world... Further pressure was applied here. The vision of the subject's past retreated. Truly their worlds are squalid.]

I rise. Severax's eyes glint as he follows my movements. He is motionless.

'Our lord has a mission of great sensitivity for you. A council of war is even now being convened. We speak to you first brother, as your role is of the utmost importance.'

A holomap comes to life in the air. It shows the entire front across the Gulf. Multiple systems blink with red infographics denoting the presence of the tau forces. Many more blink a sinister purple, showing the great swathe of worlds that have fallen to the alien's false promises. It saddens me to see so many turn away from the Emperor's light. We will retake them all, and their populations will be made to suffer for it once the Inquisition arrives. I pity them. Do they not see? It is true that this region of space is distant from Terra, and does not often see aid from the High Lords, but it is crucial. It is their duty to hold, no matter the cost. The cost for not doing so will be greater to them. Every crack in the fabric of the Imperium threatens to become a fissure. This cannot be allowed to happen. It is the duty of every citizen to make sure it does not.

Shrike looks to Severax. There is a slight nod in reply. 'Lord Severax has determined that this world is lost, brother-sergeant, and the Dovar System entire. Already the outlying planets have fallen. Agrellan cannot hope to withstand the attack that is coming. Analysis of their doctrine suggests that the tau would

ordinarily bypass such a system, to return to it later once supply lines are cut. Surrounded, as populous a world as Agrellan cannot hold out. They would starve. But here, they have not the time. The tau seek to secure this system. This kind of war here is not of the tau's liking.' Shrike fixes me with his dark eyes. 'Their ways are our ways, brother-sergeant, the lightning strike, the overwhelming application of force to vulnerabilities. A protracted ground campaign they prefer to avoid. It suits the Imperium better. But the tau require this system as a staging point, and they will do all they can to seize it. Already their numbers far exceed ours, and more are coming.' Shrike bids the map to zoom in, showing the system, a densely populated cluster of worlds, the gap in the clouds – the Dovar Gap.

'Nebulae hem Dovar. The tau's drives cannot pass easily through them. It is the fortress gate in the walls of the Damocles Gulf. But we must abandon it,' said Shrike. 'Lord Severax has decreed it.'

'I understand, brother shadow captain.'

'We will choose our battleground, not they. Already we have lost too many men battling over Agrellan. The tau are closer to home than we. They will likely exhaust their empire to take it. Small as it is, the taus' domain is vibrant, and confident. Lose here, and we lose the entire subsector. By the time a new crusade is prepared, they will be fortified and ready. We will melt away, and draw them where we will. Elsewhere, we will break their assault, crush their main forces in a battle of our choosing, and then reclaim what is rightfully the Emperor of Mankind's.'

'My lord,' I say. I am astonished that such information is shared with me.

'I am telling you this, brother-sergeant, because Lord Severax wishes you to go to the surface. Take your squad. You are to seize one of their number and deliver him to Inquisitor Gallius and High Magos Biologian Tulk here.'

'You wish me to snatch one of their leader caste? I... Consider it done, shadow captain! I will...'

Lord Severax chooses to speak. He leans forward in his throne, armoured hands gripping the carven rests. I see his face fully. His skin is as white as snow, his hair blacker than midnight.

'You presume too much,' he admonishes me. His voice is little more than a whisper, but his criticism cuts me. I bow my head, I hang upon his every word. 'Capturing their ethereals is nigh on impossible. Every attempt that has been tried has failed with great loss,' said Severax. 'They will fight to the last to protect them. This task of which you speak we will save for another day. No. Your target is one of their emissaries. You will take one of them, and bring him to us, so that he might reveal the secrets of their persuasiveness.' He falls silent

again.

‘Our forces are sufficient to win this war, but we are losing many more worlds to the efforts of their diplomatic core than we are to military action,’ continues Shrike. ‘We are to be granted no more reinforcement for the foreseeable future. We cannot afford to become committed in one place, while their emissaries talk the worlds of the Emperor out of His light. Capture one of these emissaries while they are distracted. While we are evacuating, you will be on Agrellan. This is a great honour.’

‘We feel that they must have some kind of psychic or chemical hold over those they approach. How else can the number who capitulate be explained?’ The biologist’s artificial lungs wheeze as he speaks.

‘They need a live subject,’ adds Gallius. ‘He must be delivered alive, do you understand, sergeant?’

‘In order to verify our hypotheses,’ interrupts the biologist. He shows insufficient respect to our lord, he does not acknowledge him before he speaks. This angers me. The inquisitor is different. He shows deference, looking to Lord Severax before daring to speak. His face is lined with worry. It is the lot of the Inquisition to carry heavy burdens of knowledge and responsibility. Compared to my own duty to fight and die, his is onerous indeed.

‘We have further assets in play,’ says the inquisitor, ‘should you fail.’

‘I will not fail,’ I say.

‘Might is not always the sharpest weapon, a truth your Chapter exemplifies.’ The inquisitor paces around me slowly, looking me up and down. ‘We have an agent, a traitor among traitors, implanted with a tracer buried so deep that even the tau will not find it.’

‘This is good,’ I say. ‘He will deliver the emissary to us?’

‘They may,’ says the inquisitor. ‘Should it prove expedient. They have their orders. You have yours. Let us mesh them together for best effect. The one our agent guards, he is of particular interest to us.’

‘Any will do,’ interrupts Tulk.

Gallius stares at the biologist. ‘But this one is of particular interest.’ He turns back to me. ‘If a direct assault does not succeed...’

‘If the quarry goes to ground, flush him out.’

‘And let one’s hound chase it down,’ says the inquisitor. He understands our ways.

Our exchange pleases my Lord Severax. There is a fleeting expression of approval on his otherwise still features. None but a brother of the Raven Guard would notice it.

‘I have it on good authority that you are becoming adept at our ways, brother-

sergeant,' says Severax. 'You have been chosen because of Shadow Captain Shrike's personal recommendation.'

To hear such words from my lord fills my hearts with pride.

'I serve as best I can, lord,' I say.

'Then serve us well, and deliver to us this war-talker, who poisons the minds of rightful men against the proper rule of the Lord of Mankind. This is your duty. Go now, and prepare.'

I obey, and with alacrity. Later, I and Inquisitor Gallius will have further words, and our trap will be set.

CHAPTER FOUR

The meeting was to take place a dozen kilometres outside of Hive Chaeron's walls. The Imperials had set up a temporary landing pad in a hole they'd carved in that awful forest. The trees had been cut back for a good three hundred metres, the red earth scraped raw by a heavy excavator. Our pilot took us through the canopy into the darkness beneath the trees. I couldn't see out of the transport, but I felt the shadow close over me. There was a real presence down there, a menace that had the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. The tau were unaffected, although I saw Krix's quills shift. The faces of kroot are hard, most of them taken up by a mouth that's more akin to a beak than anything else. Their flesh is thin, little musculature under it. To we gue'vesa, your average earth caste is inexpressive, but they've got nothing on the kroot. It's like their faces are cast in stone. I could still tell that he felt the wrongness of Mu'gulath Bay too.

The Devilfish touched down so softly that we couldn't tell we'd landed until Kor'la D'yanoi Yel'fyr – the air caste up front – flicked the signal and the landing lights went from amber to green.

'Well now,' said Skilltalker, patting his knees with his hands twice and hitching up his robes in preparation to stand. 'We have arrived, and our task is at hand. Let us see if we cannot save a few lives here. Gue'vesa've, if you would be so kind?' he said to me.

I had the squad sound off that they were set. They were. Their 'affirmatives' and 'yes sirs' told me far less than the air of wary readiness that came over them. They were a good la'rua, and I was very proud of them. We'd adopted a synthesis of Imperial Guard and fire caste teachings and I'd been gratified to see that it worked. With them behind me, and equipped with superior earth caste weaponry, I often felt that we could take on the entire Imperium on our own. And we all had reasons to want to.

I was wrong about our effectiveness, of course, and even my team's cohesion. You drill and drill and concentrate on one thing so hard you miss what's right in front of you. We have a word for it in Gothic – hubris. I was relatively well-educated for an Imperial, I must add here. You won't find this level of talk right across society, as I'm sure you've noticed by now in your dealings with other gue'la. Skilltalker was fascinated by the concept. Apparently there is no word for it in the modern tau language, although one day he did come up to me hurriedly, a look of delight on his face, to say he'd found an ancient term from the time of the Mont'ka that had an approximate meaning. In all honesty, I'd advise you reacquaint yourselves with it.

The rear ramp opened. There's wasn't even a hiss, the internal air pressure had automatically and soundlessly matched that of outside. I don't think I'll ever be able to take tau tech for granted.

We went out. I took point, Holyon behind me. He might have been a liar, but you could rely on him in a fight. We had to be prepared for battle despite the terms of truce we were meeting under. If we were attacked, it wouldn't be the first time the water caste has been targeted.

The clearing was muddy, broken tree stumps all around it, roots still clogged with the heavy red soil of Agrellan, bright scars in them leaking pale sap. A plasteel mesh had been laid down over the ground in the centre of the clearing, although it was far from level. Beacons blinked around the makeshift pad, the light coming off them making it hard to see under the trees, and that made me nervous. The trees of Agrellan are brittle, they snap so easily. The wood feels dead, their skins are slimy, leaves black like they are in the grip of decay, but they were alive somehow. I don't know how something so sickly looking can grow into a forest. I didn't like the place and I'm extremely grateful I've not been stationed there.

I'd appreciate it if you didn't send me back.

A pathway of more mesh led off from the pad to the lip of a slope. From up there we had a fine view of Hive Chaeron. Big as a mountain, as hives are. The lower reaches must have been a hundred kilometres in diameter. Levels heaped upon level, reaching high up into the atmosphere so the top of it was lost in the yellow clouds.

We were a ways out, but from the landing zone the walls looked huge. It was getting late in the afternoon, not yet evening, but the shadows were lengthening, and that of Chaeron lay like a slab of night on the haunted forest. The walls of Chaeron were white, blinding up close, but through the haze of pollution in the air they were coloured a gentle shade of apricot by the sun. A thousand metres tall, their length broken by bastions topped with macrocannon. A sixteen lane

highway – a penline on a cloth compared to the bulk of the hive – went through a gate almost directly opposite us, but the gates were closed and the road empty. They were ready for war.

It was all a little unreal, too big to be taken in and understood by the human mind. Like the Imperium itself, I suppose. The sunlight was broken by the haze, made dim, so that the hive looked like a painted backdrop. Only the lights on the evening side of it and the movements of fliers around the upper reaches told me it was not. I'll bet my last pulse round that the landing site had been chosen so that we'd be intimidated by the size of the hive. It didn't work. I still don't quite grasp how blind my erstwhile countrymen can be. Earth caste weapons would have the walls down in a half hour or less. Bu clacked his tongue behind me in disapproval. He was wearing a respirator, as was the por'el. We all had our helmet seals engaged. There was something foul in the atmosphere.

'How they live in such things? It is unsafe, unsanitary. Unsupportable. And this air!'

I motioned him to silence 'Someone's coming.'

Up the path hacked into the forest, a welcome party came. A functionary come to greet us, a squad of Guardsmen behind him. He wore heavy robes that looked like they'd not been washed for a while – if they could be, they were so stiff with brocade I doubt they'd survive any form of cleaning. Half his head was taken up by a lumpen cogitator and an ugly bionic eye. Not an Adeptus Mechanicus, as far as I could tell, but extensively modified anyhow. It was possible his own respirator was built into his face.

They came close, the Guardsmen faceless behind their respirators, marching in perfect step.

'I am Plenipotentiary Carrillon. On behalf of the Lord Grunkel of Hive Chaeron, I greet you in the spirit of peace,' he said, touching a seal of office hanging around his chest. He spoke very loudly and slowly from behind his breathing apparatus. He was looking me up and down suspiciously. No doubt taking in my feet, the five fingers on my gloved hands, my height. I decided to put him out of his misery. As the routine we'd developed with Skilltalker dictated, I slung my carbine and unfastened my helmet, revealing my human face to them all. I had a smaller respirator on underneath simply so I could pull this trick. Like I say, it's all carefully thought out.

Carrillon managed to keep his reaction to a narrowing of his remaining eye. The Guardsmen with him were not so careful. Shocked intakes of breath and muttered curses came from them. I'm sure they'd all heard of the traitors who'd thrown in their lot with the xenos, but there aren't that many of us in the Tau'Shas'Va as yet, and they probably thought of us as a myth. Carrillon held up

his hand to silence them.

‘Gue’vesa’vre Jathen Korling, gue’vesa auxiliary diplomatic protection la’rua eight-four-four-eight,’ I said. I held Carrillon’s eye. If Carrillon was going to say anything, he never got the chance, because then Skilltalker made his entrance. Followed by Krix, he walked down the ramp of the Devilfish and into that sorry excuse for a landing zone.

He was looking around with eyes wide and welcoming, as if he were drinking in every sight he could, and that each was a fresh wonder. They’re childlike, the por’la, at least in that regard. Appear childlike, I should say. Like everything they do and have us do, it’s all calculated to bring about a particular reaction. I stood aside and replaced my helmet. The air was making my eyes water. Skilltalker came to the fore. We all stood to attention, carbines held vertically in front of us. Another calculated show, this one to demonstrate our loyalty. I wasn’t too worried. Kor’la D’yanoi Yel’fyfyr would be on high alert in the Devilfish, and the drones housed on the front of the craft were always vigilant.

Skilltalker crossed his hands in front of his chest and bowed. ‘Many thanks to you for our cordial reception, Plenipotentiary Carrillon. I am Emissary Por’el Bork’an Kais Por’noha, although I am more commonly referred to as Skilltalker.’

Skilltalker ignored Carrillon’s derisory snort at his name. To humans, the names of tau can seem to be unduly immodest, although this mystifies most tau I know. Why would a tau have a name that bragged of something that were not true? Fine, I say. But often for us it is regarded as impolite to make a big deal about the things we are good at, at least in some human cultures. Mine is one of those. We are a more subtle and diverse species than most of you give us credit for, and on Gormen’s Fast, we don’t like braggarts.

‘I bring you greetings from the tau. We are five castes, one people. We offer you peace.’

Carrillon shook his head ever so slightly, a sour look on his face. A mix of contempt and foreknowledge of his defeat, I think. ‘This way Emissary Skilltalker,’ his augmetic ground out an unlovely recitation of Skilltalker’s full tau name for him. ‘Lord Grunkel awaits you.’

We were led down the path around a curve to a large, hermetically sealed pavilion fronted by an ostentatious airlock. One of Carrillon’s guards activated the airlock and I, Krix, Bu and Skilltalker went inside. I voxed the squad to hang back by the entrance. ‘Watch them,’ I said, confident that there was no way the Imperium could crack tau encryption. ‘I don’t like this. The whole thing stinks of ambush.’

‘Wouldn’t be the first time, Jathen’vre,’ said Goliath.

‘We’ve got your back,’ said Holyon. For once, I believed him.

The outer door shut. Air was pumped out, then back in. The inner door opened. The exercise was accompanied by a cacophony of whirring, banging, clanging and whining. I saw just how primitive our technology is, how ramshackle. I can’t believe I used to take things like that to be normal.

We stepped out. The floor was covered in carpets showing already wet patches from damp trapped inside the tent. The fabric of the habitat was beaded with condensation. The place was luxurious, but grimy. A long wooden table ran the width of the tent. Two guards in scarlet dress uniforms, crested, golden helmets and respirators stood to attention behind it, flanking a fat man in a similar outfit who sat in a ridiculously overly ornamented chair. He had a face like thunder, and a mouth full of food. Many dishes were laid in front of him. The whole meeting, his fork never stopped moving. His head was bald and beaded with sweat, his eyes sunk in folds of flesh. A thin moustache and tiny, triangular beard clung to his flabby face.

‘Ah, Lord Grunkel,’ said Skilltalker, pressing his hands together and speaking with unalloyed delight. ‘Such a great pleasure to meet you face to face. I am Emissary Por’el Bork’an Kais Por’noha. I bring you greetings from the tau, we are five castes, one people, and I am here with full authority to invite you to lay down your arms and join with us. We offer a bright future for all who side with us, a new way of life. We have much to offer a faithful friend. All are bound to the dream of bringing a new and better way to the universe. All are working to the Greater Good. I hope you will choose to share the culture, technology and protection of the tau empire, as your kind here with me today already have.’

Grunkel grunted and glared at me. ‘I’ve heard your standard offer before, as I have heard of these traitors. I am sure, if I were to ask him, that he’d tell me how wonderful it is to live with stinking xenos and spit on the law of the Emperor. I’m not so naïve to believe that he could possibly be either entirely honest or not coerced. I’m not interested.’ He wiped his mouth and hands on a napkin, then stood and gestured at the chairs. ‘Nevertheless, I invite you to please, sit. I dislike aliens but am not a barbarian. This meeting was called under fair terms and I intend to uphold them. I offer you what little luxury we have. The blockade has been hard on my people.’

Grunkel’s fat belly and the small fortune’s worth of off-world delicacies led me to believe he was suffering far less than his subjects. Always the way.

‘Most unfortunate. I am sorry for the miseries of your people.’ said Skilltalker. And damn it, he meant it, not that Grunkel believed him. A chair was pulled out for the tau by a liveried servant, and he sat gracefully. Water caste are taller than fire warriors, something else that often proves a surprise to us. ‘We have many

supplies of a high grade. Upon your surrender, they will be immediately dispatched to your city, along with aid teams and marshalling officers, all of them are fully briefed and ready to aid your government in providing for the new citizens of the Tau'va.'

'What's that? Commonwealth or something?' Grunkel poured a generous measure of wine into a glass and handed it to Skilltalker. He wouldn't have known that alcohol has no effect and less appeal for the tau. He also wouldn't know that the water caste's bodies, thanks to the efforts of the earth caste, are mostly inured to poisons. Skilltalker drank the wine. No doubt it tasted vile to him, but he smiled with appreciation. 'Empire, more like,' said Grunkel. He reached for a roll of bread and broke it in two, stuffing one piece into his mouth. He spoke as he chewed and waved the other half at Skilltalker. 'You come here, bringing traitors, hoping to show me how safe and fine life is under the tau. Do you take me for a simpleton? I am not fooled.'

'They are not traitors!' said Skilltalker. 'Not traitors to civilisation and peace. You may ask gue'vesa'vere J'ten Ko'lin whatever you will. The presence of my protection team here vouches for the honesty of the Greater Good. They are my guard. They accompany me everywhere. Their weapons are at my back every day and every night. They could, if they so chose, end my existence at a whim. But they do not. They work for the Greater Good, as do I. They serve me willingly, and I for my part serve them willingly, by serving the greater ideal of the Greater Good. This is what Tau'va means.'

Grunkel sat back with a sigh, pushing out his belly. I'm glad I had my helmet on. The smell of non-Tau'va humans gets to me now. Tau are fastidiously clean creatures, although they smell strange to me still. Humans can be, but in places like Agrellan, where everything is in short supply, including water, hygiene's not a priority, even in the monied classes. In short, Grunkel reeked. Of sweat, of unwashed clothes, but most of all of privilege built on the suffering of others.

'I've heard such offers all before, at one time or another. Not always in the same pretty words, and not always together. We're isolated out here, the Imperium's eye is elsewhere. It's up to men like me to make sure that the rule of the Emperor does not falter, but it does.' He glanced at me. 'Pirates, renegades, xenos... The Damocles Gulf is a playground for them all. We have to fend for ourselves, make sure the light of the Emperor and the Imperium does not fail. Tell me, tau. How are you different to the hrud? Your kind will infest our world as surely as they would. And what makes you different to the orks? Your threats are more coy than theirs, but I hear them all the same. And your weaponry, as has been pointed out to me by other emissaries like yourself, is far better than that carried by the greenskins.' He leaned forward with a grunt. With a gut like

that, he must have been in constant discomfort. He picked up more food, some kind of stringy meat, and dipped it into a pot of sauce. ‘You offer us nothing but slavery, hidden behind the words of friendship,’ he said, before taking a bite of the meat. Sauce dribbled into his beard.

Skilltalker was dismayed. ‘No! No, none are slaves. We all work together, for the Greater Good.’

‘Do you know, your kind, how large the Imperium is? Do you?’ Grunkel smiled nastily. ‘I’m sure treacherous men like your J’thing here has filled you in. The Imperium of Man is the largest empire in the cosmos. It stretches from one side of the galaxy to the other. Your little “commonwealth”, no matter how dynamic it feels itself to be, runs up only against the bulwarks of the Imperium – we here beside the Gulf. And although you may breach the walls in one place, you cannot hope to take the fortress. Once you have drawn the attention of the High Lords of Terra, my alien “friend”, then your kind will regret its arrogance, shortly before it ceases to exist altogether. If you sincerely believe in your messages of cohabitation and peace, and I am not convinced at all by those, then in the same spirit I offer you some sage advice of my own. Withdraw back over the Damocles Gulf. Fortify your frontier, and pray that the Imperium deems you too little of a threat to bother crushing, because crushed you will be. No matter your technology, no matter your self-belief. You goad a giant, and wake it at your peril.’

Quite the speech, I thought. Skilltalker’s expression was open and sympathetic. ‘Oh great lord of the Imperium, thank you for your advice, but I fear it cannot and will not be acted upon. That is not our destiny. Our destiny is to carry the message of the Greater Good to all, and bring peace to the galaxy.’

Grunkel twisted his lips and shook his head in disbelief. ‘You believe yourselves so superior. And, heretical as it might be to say so, you might be right. I have seen your technology. But you are few, and we are many.’

‘And you cannot see that your time has passed,’ countered Skilltalker. ‘Here, let us show you some of the technical and social benefits we can offer you, as equals, all working together as one.’ He waved Bu forward, but Grunkel scowled at him. Bu came to the table only to stop before setting his demonstration unit down. As far as I could tell, he was hurt by the rejection. But they’re stoic, the earth caste. Annoyingly stoic.

‘I’m not interested. You can take your impure alien junk and shove it into whatever passes for an alimentary exit in your species.’

Charming, I thought, and this is the upper level of Agrellan society.

Skilltalker looked glum, although the manner of expression made it abundantly clear that it was sorrow he felt for Grunkel, not himself. ‘As stars are

born, burn bright and then decay, so do empires. Do you think that your species has a monopoly on power? Archaeologists of our earth and water castes have discovered evidence of lost civilisations that predate both of ours by tens of millions of years!’ He held out his hands, as if he would wring a drop of reason from this rock of Imperial rectitude. ‘Why, yours is not even the first empire of mankind – our contact with worlds you have forgotten about tells us that. I assure you, it will be the last. Your people will live on within our commonwealth, whether or not you yourself live to see it. And I rejoice that it is so, for genocide is shameful and unnecessary. Would that we could welcome you all into our fold without bloodshed. If you fear the retribution of your kind, do not. Work with us! The more of you that do, the less power the tyranny of your masters will hold over you. Be safe, be free.’

‘Free?’ snorted Grunkel. ‘Freedom’s a dangerous myth. I say again, I’ve heard all this before, Skilltalker. You think that your army waiting out there,’ he gestured upwards, ‘makes me more inclined to take your duplicitous offer, or less? You underestimate us if you think we shall all be so easily intimidated. There were water caste here before the last attempt you people made to take our worlds. I’ve seen your broadcasts, read your propaganda.’ He looked directly at me as he continued to speak. ‘All very marvellous, but better, I say, better the righteous rule of the Emperor of Mankind, better the chains of honest servitude than an alien boot on the neck in a false equality.’

He threw down his meat, leaned back, sighed and laced his fingers over his gut again.

‘I am sure you will be very disappointed, xenos, but this is my answer – there will be no surrender of Hive Chaeron.’

Skilltalker nodded, understanding and disappointment artfully expressed by his remarkable face. ‘I understand. I thank you for this meeting.’ He stood, and bowed, hands crossed across his chest in the tau way. ‘If you should survive the attentions of our hunter cadres, I hope we may meet again, and that your opinion will have changed.’

With that he headed for the airlock. Krix followed, turning to and fro, alert for any sign of ambush. Bu and I followed.

‘Wait!’ called Grunkel. Skilltalker stopped. ‘I have a question for your human slave.’

‘J’ten?’ asked Skilltalker.

I turned. ‘Go ahead, Grunkel.’ Not using his title pleased me greatly. It didn’t faze him. I reckon he was a kind of pragmatist, Grunkel. He was no coward, either. I feel for men like him. Sure, he was a pig of a man, a tyrant. But the system he existed in demanded he be one. He knew he stood a good chance of

dying. What could he do? He was playing the odds; a pity for him that he laid down the wrong hand on the table.

‘Tell me, “J’ten”, if that is your name. Is it truly as he says? Is it better for you as a slave of theirs or as a subject of the Emperor’s?’

I regarded him through my helmet vision system for a moment. It put distance between us, that technological interface. Looking at him that way made him seem disconnected from my life, ridiculous even. All that made my time before the Tau’va seem almost impossible. I almost believed it had been some kind of nightmare. Almost.

‘What do you think?’ I said to Grunkel. I then spoke to Skilltalker. ‘I advise us to depart now, por’el.’

Skilltalker hesitated. He was such a professional, making it clear to Grunkel that he was considering my words. I was no lackey.

‘Very well, gue’vesa’vre. I concur. Farewell, Lord Grunkel.’

We left the tent. The last time I’d done something like this, I’d been on the other side, back when I was still Jathen Korling and I was a captain in the Gormen’s Fast planetary defence force. I knew as soon as the tau came in – in greater force that time, I might add, our water caste visitor lacked Skilltalker’s flair for humility – that we were outgunned. We could all see it, all except Colonel Artreuse. Looking back at our audience with Grunkel, maybe he saw it too. Maybe he was just too proud to accept it. It’s no easy thing to accept that your time is done.

Grunkel was more of a pragmatist than Artreuse, but not as much of one as Boroth. We roll our dice and take our choices. I made mine. Grunkel made his. I’m alive, and Grunkel’s dead. What does that tell you?

Evening was coming on outside. The hive’s upper levels, jutting so far above the curve of Agrellax, still glowed amber, but the walls were grey with shade, and the forest floor already lost to night.

‘They’re up to something,’ I signalled the squad. ‘Hincks, Othelliar, take point. Goliath, Helena, close in on the por’el. Holyon, stick by me. Might be worth getting Kor’la D’yanoi Yel’fyr to fire up the drones.’

Bu grabbed my sleeve, his other arm cradling his ignored tech demonstrator. ‘We wait here. No go. Por’el thinks we be safe.’

‘That’s not his job, it’s mine. He’s too invested in ideas of honour and mutual gain to see how devious these swine can be,’ I said. ‘I don’t like it. Something’s up.’

We rounded the corner into the landing glade. Kor’la D’yanoi Yel’fyr had been hauled from his cockpit, struggling to stand on legs suited to zero-g. Men

stood around, their weapons pointed.

‘Oh no,’ I said. ‘They’ve gone and done it.’ This was no fear for myself speaking, you understand. I knew what was going to happen. My guts clenched. These men were all going to die.

‘Drop your weapons! Stand down. You are to be taken prisoner!’ their officer shouted.

‘Oh the damned idiots,’ I heard Helena whisper.

‘Don’t do this!’ I said, switching my helmet to broadcast. ‘Stand down, we are a diplomatic mission with full immunity as agreed before the meeting.’

‘There can no consideration for xenos scum and traitors! How marvellous can this Greater Good be? You have fallen into a trap.’

With a half-platoon of lasguns trained on me, I let my weapon fall, my squad followed suit. I would not be party to gunning down men I would have once fought alongside. This was small consolation.

‘No my friend,’ I said softly. ‘You have triggered one yourself.’

This is the way it goes; once weapons are raised and threats offered, everyone gets a chance to surrender. The por’el turned to me. Now was the time. They might take it better from me.

‘Now, for the love of the Emperor, lay down your arms.’

The Guardsman laughed. ‘You have no love for the Emperor, traitor!’

They moved forward to arrest us, but never made it.

Fire came hissing out of the trees, the gentle burr of sound-suppressed burst cannons. It was so quiet that the Guardsmen only realised they were under fire when three men exploded into hunks of flesh.

An instant of shocked silence, and then the clearing erupted into pandemonium. Men threw themselves in all directions, too busy trying to save their own skins to open fire on us.

One of the Devilfish’s drones popped out of its housing and rushed towards Skilltalker, encasing him in a glowing sheath of energy. The Guardsman had been instructed to bring him down, it seemed, for large amounts of weapons fire came his way, but he stood there impassively, protected by the superior technology of the Greater Good.

When they realised what was happening, they turned their guns on us, shooting Hincks dead out of spite. Krix went into them, moving so fast that the first three men he killed didn’t even register his presence. He screeched fearsomely, and the remaining Guardsmen ran from him, right at the stealth teams hidden in the fringes of the forest.

‘Stop! Stop! Enough! Cease firing! Let them be!’ ordered the por’el.

The stealth teams’ blood was up, and it took a repeat of Skilltalker’s order

before the shooting stopped. Bodies lay everywhere around the clearing. Guard came running up the path to be met by our raised weapons. The stealth teams emerged behind them, their shapes visible as a glimmer on the air. This time, when asked to drop their weapons, they complied.

‘Such a waste, such a waste,’ said Skilltalker softly. He walked around, looking at the carnage, still protected by the shield drone. Krix was looking at the bodies longingly, but he wouldn’t eat, not in the presence of the tau.

Bu helped Kor’la D’yanoi Yel’fyr back into his pod, as he was practically helpless at this level of gravity. My men surrounded the Guardsmen, bunching them up in front of the Devilfish. One of the stealth teams headed off to the tent. There was a brief round of gunfire, and then they came back, their bulky forms behind Grunkel and more Guardsmen. All told, we’d taken about thirty prisoner.

‘What shall we do with them?’ I said.

‘Leave them,’ said Skilltalker. ‘This is a diplomatic meeting, and I will abide by the laws of it, even if they do not.’

‘They’ll only fight O’Shassera,’ I said.

‘Then they will die. But that is their choice. It will not be mine. Destroy their weapons.’

My remaining men got on with that while the stealth teams watched the prisoners. I looked at the smoking corpses, checking them for signs of life. Skilltalker saw a waste. I saw idiocy. Grunkel was standing in the flood of the tide and denying his feet were wet. That was the real shame of it. Times are changing. Most of my kind just don’t know it yet.

‘Stupid,’ I said to Grunkel. He stared back, hands clasped behind his head, in the same boat as his men for once. He was a cold-eyed whoreson, that’s for sure.

‘Not stupid,’ said Skilltalker, talking more to Grunkel than to me. ‘This is an act of defiance, a petty act. Now look, your men are dead, and for what?’

‘You brought men too,’ said Grunkel, somewhat petulantly, I thought.

Skilltalker smiled sadly. ‘Only because the perfidy of your kind is well-known. I thank destiny not all of you are the same. Our offer still stands. Please reconsider. I wish to see you working with us, together, and not dead in this manner. It is a waste.’

‘Go to hell, xenos.’ Grunkel snarled through his respirator. ‘I’d rather die.’

Skilltalker’s smile faded. ‘I’m very much afraid that you will, much to my eternal regret.’

Skilltalker turned and went back into the Devilfish. We retrieved Hincks’s body. We stood warily, our guns on the Guardsmen as we waited for the engines to spool up. You could see that a lot of the Guard there were considering Skilltalker’s offer, but we couldn’t take them.

Bu went into the craft. We followed, guns up all the way.

The door shut on the faces of those who had thought that they were going to die. Their relief was easily apparent. Skilltalker showed mercy and artful diplomacy in releasing the men, for what little good it did them. If their leaders did not surrender, they'd only die tomorrow, or the day after.

The Devilfish took off, carrying us back to our ship to take us back to the fleet. Back on the ground, the stealth teams would be vanishing in front of the Imperials, going back to hide in the jungle to wait for O'Shaserra's attack to come over the following days.

Grunkel should have surrendered.

CHAPTER FIVE

I never cease to wonder at the efficiency of the tau.

Only days later and the battle for Agrellan was at full spate. It was late afternoon where we were. Already ten of the twelve hives – Chaeron included – had fallen to Shadowsun’s First Strike hunter cadres. *In a single day*. Those kinds of rapid gains must have taken the Imperial brass totally by surprise. As history proves, the remaining two cities would not hold out long. I’d heard that the Imperials had begun evacuating the planet the moment Shadowsun attacked. Clever that, as our forces were committed elsewhere, too spread out to do much about it. I suppose that’s the benefits of having your army commanded by a Space Marine Chapter Master. He gave Shadowsun a run for her money all right.

The Imperials were pulling back all their assets to Agrellan Prime where they were being ferried into orbit. Their fleet was away over that side of the planet, well out of our line of view, holding position over Agrellan Prime and keeping the tau battlegroup back while their warriors were pulled out of the fire. I wondered if the Imperials were going to offer to take the civilian population away with them, and I wondered how many of the civilians would accept that offer. Most of the fighting was away from us, but the ground rumbled with distant artillery bombardments, and flights of Sun Sharks screamed overhead periodically.

There were few warriors at our position, but the earth caste support work group was busy all around us. The invasion hadn’t even concluded, and already the earth caste were busily constructing a spaceport. Hell, they were building a city. I’m sure pre-existing ground-to-orbit facilities had been identified as key targets for various teams in the cadres, but these assets were as much a liability for the tau. Most of them were close by or built onto the hive cities. As such, guaranteeing their security was nigh on impossible. The cities were vast. No matter how quickly the armed forces capitulated or were routed, the hives were

occupied by fractious populations. Not everyone was going to see the tau as a liberating power. The hives would take days to fully pacify, the spaceports and landing pads would be prime targets for every fanatic with a bomb and a death wish. The tau couldn't risk their constructor groups or administrators coming under attack. Bu had also told me that the earth caste was amazed – in a very bad way – at the hive cities. Some ambitious plans were mooted to convert them, but as Bu said, it'd take a long time to make them fit for the Greater Good, and in any case the population of the world was going to be greatly reduced as the earth caste calculated Agrellan was well over its optimum population loading. He confided to me that personally, he'd prefer to see them dismantled, but he didn't think that was going happen. The Third Sphere advance was progressing too quickly to take the time to do it.

To get round this lack of secure facilities, in usual earth caste fashion they were going to build a new city, under fire, in little under three days.

As we were mere gue'vesa, and not entirely to be trusted, we were assigned rear line duties, in our case guarding the site of this new settlement, named prosaically Mu'gulath'effu've – Mu'gulath First Bridgehead.

Not very poetic, the earth caste.

I can't say I was completely disappointed. Space Marines had been present on the planet since the first Imperial reinforcement – White Scars, so I understand, although I never saw any of them. But more had come, Raven Guard, their leader taking command of the whole counter-invasion force. Only a few hundred all told, if that, but that's more than enough. You have to understand, that to citizens of the Imperium the Adeptus Astartes are the stuff of myth, almost gods... And we're scared of them. They are called the Angels of Death for good reason.

There were a few fire warrior teams – real warriors, as far as the tau were concerned, but I'm not convinced. I know I'm on dangerous ground here, but I reckon you've enough to shoot me already in this recording should you decide I'm not sufficiently obedient. I've noticed that when battle's going against fire warriors; they've got less staying power than men. I'm looking forward to the time that we gue'la are trusted enough to take up front line work with the likes of the mal'kor and the thraxians. We've a lot to give, not least flexibility.

Anyway, that's something I've been badgering fire warrior command about whenever I'm able. I doubt I won them over, they must have judged the time right, because we will be shipping out to the front as soon as my vocal grafts take. I can't wait, I really can't. I can't say all my messages and petitions did the job. But maybe what convinced them is partly down to what happened there, at Mu'gulath'effu've.

Shadowsun began her attack early in the morning, by local noon earth caste construction teams were clearing the area and beginning to erect the first buildings. The first to come down, under attack, was a lifting unit bearing the four-storey central command node. Somehow it deposited its load and got away before it got shot down. With the command node down, everything sped up. Flights of lifters brought in earth caste equipment, and as soon as they were down, they started laying the road network out. Enemy aircraft were cleared soon after, and we had clear skies for the earth caste to bring their heavier units in. By mid-afternoon, the streets had all been laid out, foundations were dug and basing modules in place, and more and more prefabricated buildings were being shipped in by the air caste. The place was swarming with construction drones, engineers and several hundred alien members of the Tau'va. There was an ethereal on site – Aun'Kira – up in the command node overseeing it all, which goes to show how certain we were of victory. We were co-opted into patrolling the perimeter, but we were there in the first place because our Por'el Skilltalker was stationed at First Bridgehead. A large part of the complex was given over to reprocessing, and there were several water caste there. Confident of capturing many prisoners or experiencing mass surrenders, and mindful of the vast populations of Agrellan's twelve hives, the reprocessing centres had been put up first. By early evening, we'd already had over ten thousand captured Imperial soldiers brought to the facility, processed, and we were beginning to ship those who were willing to pledge their loyalty to the Tau'va out.

It's harsh what happened to those as didn't, but that's war. They had their choice.

It was just after we heard that Agrellan Two had fallen to the cadres, we were attacked.

Don't get me wrong. I'm sure this incident has been played over and again at the High Command. There were half a dozen or so bridgeheads constructed by the earth caste teams, why ours was the only one attacked was way above my command tier to know for sure at the time, although it became all too clear. In the immediate aftermath my suspicions were that this was no attack of opportunity, and yeah, in light of what happened later I should have acted on them. I admitted that fair and square at the debriefing. I was still in a situation then where I didn't feel it my place to speak up and contradict my superiors' predictions. Commander O'Hye'esera herself told me, to my face, that that should never happen again, that I should speak my mind and that my being a gue'vesa made no difference, that we are all equals fighting for the Greater Good. More than that, she said that I would have much deeper understanding of the gue'la because I am gue'vesa, and that my opinion would therefore be

valued.

I am learning, I swear. Still, hindsight's a marvellous thing.

There was one cadre stationed to protect First Bridgehead, along with five kroot kindreds, my la'rua, two other gue'vesa auxiliary teams, and one thraxian close melee. Around two companies' strength in Imperial Guard terms, I guess. We didn't see the attack coming at all. Why would we? We were a long way behind the – rapidly shrinking – main lines, the Imperials had been taken unawares despite being prepared, and their evacuation was well underway when we started on First Bridgehead. I'd have thought a cadre backed-up by gunships and one of the new Riptides would be enough to dissuade anyone, but those Catachans are not easily intimidated.

I was patrolling the southern perimeter with my team when it happened. The woods were evil, gave us all the spooks. I was glad of the ves'ron turrets watching the shade of the woods. Evil place, even in the broad light of day. There was no undergrowth so far as I could tell, only the trees grew, and their pale trunks marched off into a smeary kind of grey that was unpleasant to look too deeply into.

'Local wildlife's keeping a low profile,' said Helena.

'Good job,' said Goliath. 'It's not friendly.'

'Do they know what they're doing here? Choosing this world? Gives me the creeps, what you Imperials do to your planets,' said Othelliar. As always, that note of anger was clear in his voice.

'By "they" you mean "us", Othelliar, and by "you" you mean "them". I'm no Imperial, nor is Helena or Goliath. We're all in the Tau'va. You seem to be wilfully forgetting that.'

He mumbled something that might have been an apology. Holyon laughed. Emperor knows why.

'What's that!' said Goliath. He pointed out to the edge of the forest. Something was moving there.

'Halt,' I said, bringing the la'rua to a stop. I zoomed my lenses in to the movement at the fringe of the trees. 'Native life,' I said. A large, cat-like thing with a flat head and six legs was prowling along the edge of the forest.

'Look at that thing!' said Goliath. 'Nasty looking.'

'I've seen bigger, and I've seen worse,' said Holyon dismissively.

'How anything can live here without a respirator beats me,' said Goliath.

'It does not appear well,' said Helena.

'No,' I said. She was right, its grey fur was matted and in places fallen out to show scabbed skin. When I had my helmet zoom at maximum, I could see sores showing pretty much all over it. One of the middle pair of legs was withered.

‘Should it look like that, ’vre?’ said Helena.

‘Beats me, I don’t know if the local life is hexapedal or whether it’s a quadruped with some kind of mutation. I’m no biologist. Go ask the earth caste.’

Helena laughed. ‘They’re kind of busy, and the ones hereabouts are the wrong sort.’

‘Fine then, you’ll have to save it.’ We watched the animal slink off. In spite of its size, it didn’t appear to be much of a threat, even so, the closest ves’ron turret tracked it pretty carefully until it had vanished into the trees.

We resumed our patrol. Maybe for about a half dec. We’d settled into a steady, diligent sweep when alarms suddenly went off everywhere. That’s when we heard the first report.

‘All units, all units! Stand ready, we are under attack. We are under attack!’

We looked around like idiots, searching for the source of the disturbance. The south side was silent, alarms clanging out from the ves’ron turrets and our helmet earpieces aside, there was no movement at all. We couldn’t even hear anything, and for the time being the constant activity of the earth caste behind us went on uninterrupted.

I checked in. ‘Command, command, this is gue’vesa la’rua eight-four-four-eight, we see nothing. What are our orders?’

There was a pause before O’Hye’esera answered me personally. ‘They attack the north side. Proceed swiftly to reinforce shas’la la’rua goi’va’he’naka.’

‘What’s their target?’ I asked. The translation units in my helmet conveying my words to my commander.

‘They’re going for the reprocessing centre,’ she said. ‘The gue’la slay gue’la to prevent their joining of the Tau’va. This is abominable!’

She was right; it seemed petty, but then she didn’t know the Imperium like we did, how vindictive it could be. I think we appal you.

Signs of combat were becoming apparent. The three Hammerhead gunships that had been patrolling over our heads on the south were heading directly over the centre of First Bridgehead for the north side. Earth caste were abandoning their tasks with that iron efficiency with which they do everything. Machines were setting themselves down, protective energy shields going up around them, blast doors and shutters closing over their vulnerable parts. We ran. The site was four kilometres across. When we’d made the centre, earth caste were making their way in orderly lines to the central command node, where they’d find shelter in its bunker. We had to shove our way through them. Flights of drones whizzed over us. We could hear the gunfire now, the high pitched whine of pulse weaponry, the crack of lasguns. The drone emplacements around the command node were belting out a high rate of fire toward the north. A trio of mortar

rounds exploded nearby, showering us with dirt. We ducked into a crouch and ran on. Another, larger shell came close in afterwards, hitting the middle of a line of earth caste we'd just shoved through and lofting body parts, mud and shattered construction matrices into the sky. The shockwave caught us, sending me sprawling. Goliath helped me up. Helena and Holyon were a few paces away, helping wounded earth caste. Othelliar was a problem, sprinting toward the battle.

'You okay, boss?' said Goliath.

I shook off his hand. 'Othelliar, Othelliar! Fall back into formation now!'

I felt a little woozy. Med teams were running all over the place, hauling shocked fio'la to their feet and pushing them toward the command node. They took over from Helena who was trying to stem the flow of blood from the neck of a fio'la, and she rejoined us. Holyon came in close after. Of Othelliar, there was no sign.

'Come on, we're one gun down as it is, we need Othelliar.' I shouted into my vox-pickup. 'Back here now, la'Othelliar!'

A network of shield drones came swooping in, throwing a protective energy umbrella over the remaining earth caste as they ran into the broad, slot doors around the command node. Shells, ranged now, slammed into the energy envelope surrounding the structure. A couple got through the shields, but did little more than turn the smooth white of the exterior smoky black. Others exploded among the drones. Three fell from the sky with a clang, sending up sparks and smoke, but they did their job, and the remainder of the fio'la made it to safety.

We were away from the central section then, off up one of the radial roads, and into the battle proper.

Lines of fire warriors had taken up station around the northern edge. The Imperials had chosen their time and location well. The land for First Bridgehead had been cleared. The site was circular, and the construction patterns – the processing centre aside – proceeded sectionally, starting in the south-west quadrant and moving around the site like a clock face being filled in. Much of the superstructure had not been put into place in three-fifths of the site, and all that had was towards the south-west and west, so there was precious little cover in the north. The roads were raised somewhat, there was some shelter to be found behind the foundation plugs and turrets, and there were a handful of pits dug to facilitate more rapid deployment of the deeper-ranging prefabricated buildings, other than that we were caught in the open.

Bu had told me much about the combat deployment of earth caste facilities – he is quite bloodthirsty for a fio'la, hence his frontline attachment. And actually,

a similar facility to First Bridgehead had been my first glimpse of a tau settlement, back on Gormen's Fast two tau'cyr ago. It's all very smart, but the self-contained nature of the units that made up First Bridgehead was working against us here. If this were an Imperial beachhead, there'd have been trenches for comms lines, piles of construction materials, cumbersome earth shifter equipment. It would have taken weeks to build, but we'd have had plenty to hide behind. As it was on Mu'gulath Bay, the south was finished, but here there was nothing between us and the processing centre, and there was nothing again between that and the command node.

The Guard were in a far better position. An initial foray against the processing centre had been beaten back, and there were several dozen human bodies littering the ground in front of it, although the centre itself had not escaped unscathed. The others were a trickier proposition. Attacking from the jungle, they were deep in cover. We ran over to the fire warrior squad we had been assigned to and threw ourselves down, Othelliar was there already. He was firing his pulse gun in time with the shas'la la'rua. I was furious with him. Heedless of the fire coming in from the Guard, I kicked his gun away and rolled him onto his back.

'Don't ever do that again,' I said. 'We're supposed to work as a team. This is your team. Us, not them.' I pointed at the fire warriors. 'Or whoever happens to be fighting a fight you find appealing. You disobey orders and you compromise our efficiency. Do it again and I'll have you on charges.'

I couldn't see his face through his helmet. But he nodded. I let go of his shoulder and he rolled back over, and retrieved his weapon.

The tactical situation was so: we were out in the open, but we had by far the heavier firepower. So much of it was blasting into the woods that the Guard were keeping their heads down and their shots were poorly aimed. Secondly, pulse fire is more effective at range than las-fire. Especially somewhere like Agrellan where the haze of the atmosphere disperses the coherency of the light beams quite quickly. Every Imperial Guardsman that's lived through one engagement knows this; lasguns are reliable and cheap to make, but the environment can compromise their efficiency. We'd a number of gunships, they'd three heavy tanks in support. One was a blazing wreck already, but the other two had pushed up banks of the clay soil in front of them with their dozer blades. How they managed to get in so close is still under investigation, but I suspect it's simple fieldcraft. The Catachans have a knack for this sort of fighting, they're renowned for it. There were a good number of Sentinel walkers – another signature of the humans from that particular world. They're hard men, all right. The creatures on their home world make the diseased horrors of Agrellan look pathetic. They

wore vests and were bare-armed, barely a scrap of armour among them. Slows them down, they say. Heavily muscled too, on account of their world's high gravity. The only concession they had made to the toxicity of Agrellan was the respirators each and every one of them had on. Even a Catachan can't breathe the air of Agrellan.

Mortar fire was coming in thick and fast, bad news for us. Fire warrior teams away to the east were copping the worst of it. It was pure good fortune that there'd been a rare delay in the construction, and the atmosphere reprocessors hadn't been flown in – there was a vast network of these planned, Bu said, to clean up the air. A direct hit on one of those and the battle would've been over in short order.

O'Hye'esera was there, directing drone squadrons against the Guard. The ves'ron made a handy shield, and kept them occupied. And so we were in something of a stalemate. The lone Riptide assigned to First Bridgehead was hammering away at the trees, but the Catachans were moving around, and they were hard to see, even with all our useful technology. Markerlights – drone and tau operated – were stripping away some of the benefits they derived from cover, and I thought it wouldn't be long before our superior weaponry and superior fire discipline would drive them back into the forest where they could be hunted down after the conquest, captured, and inducted into the Tau'va at leisure. Despite our difficult position, we'd already blunted their attack. Or so I thought.

I was wrong about that.

Overlapping patterns of pulse fire started to take their toll, markerlights painting up the Catachans in bright oranges within our helmet sighting mechanisms. Shells continued falling on us, and we were taking stiff casualties, but we'd annihilated a good platoon's worth of the enemy to their two fire warrior teams' worth on our side.

That was when the Imperials revealed their secret weapon. They waited until our Riptide had advanced, jetting forward to support the rush forward of our troops. For that moment, it was on its own and unsupported by the Hammerheads.

An Imperial Knight came from the forest to the north-west. The movement of the treetops was the first indication that it was coming, and then it burst through the trees and all hell broke loose.

Knights are rare things, great walkers possessed of arcane tech. I'd seen one once before, in the same colours. House Terryn, I think. Bigger than the Riptide, and just as heavily armoured. It opened up with its battlecannon and stubbers as it came charging at our lines. Their weapons are simple solid and explosive projectile throwers, but the sheer size of them makes them devastating. All of a

sudden the triumphant feelings we'd been enjoying evaporated. A volley of battlecannon fire slammed into the lead of our three Hammerheads, blasting it into shrapnel that went scything into the fire warriors sheltering behind it. As it demolished the tank, the Knight's other weapons were running hot, sending a stream of tracer bullets into our lines. The height advantage the Knight had over us made what little cover we had useless, and perhaps a fifth of our fire warriors died in those few moments.

O'Hye'esera reacted instantly. The two remaining Hammerheads took off skyward, firing as they went. She ordered a withdrawal, and we fell back, team by team. The turrets of the command node switched to target the Knight, and the Riptide repositioned itself to engage. The earth caste were very confident about the Riptides, but I don't think they'd accounted for the shielding the Knights have. The Riptide rocked as it sent several ion rounds at the Knight. Each and every one was absorbed by the shields to the front, sending ripples of coloured light playing across the machine's heraldry. Probably the shas'vere in there thought he'd fell the Knight with no problem, generally tau weaponry shreds Imperial armour like tissue paper. He was in for a rude shock. Caught by surprise, he ignited his jets too late, lifting off the ground as the Knight broke into a lumbering run that set the ground shaking, chainfist raised. It carved through the air with a speed that took us all by surprise, crashing into the Riptide's leg and taking it clean off. The blade continued on into the side of the Riptide's jump pack, shearing through the left exhaust, and the battlesuit lurched to the left, gases billowing from it, and out of my line of sight.

We retreated from the Knight in good order. In response, the Catachans poured out of the trees in force, running toward the command node. It looked like they'd abandoned their plans to go for the processing centre and were headed right for the command centre. That there was an ethereal in there got the tau all het up. O'Hye'esera ordered a ring of steel to be cast around the node. I mean, that was the obvious target, right? The attack on the processing centre was an obvious feint.

We were all wrong about that.

'Gue'vesa teams eight-four-four-eight, eight-eight-nine-severn and eight-nine-one-three, fall back to the processing centre,' came Ethereal Aun'kira's command. He was stationed up in the command node, and hopefully safe. 'Your species will be comforted by the presence of its own. Defend the complex against any incidental aggression.'

'I hear you and respond, Aun'kira. We obey.' I signalled to my four remaining men and we ran back pell-mell from the rippling lines of fire warriors covering each other's redeployment. The other humans of the cadre joined with us. To an

Imperial this sending aliens to guard aliens would have been the height of idiocy, but the aun knew we would obey. Actually, let me put that another way; it was almost inconceivable to him that we would not do as he commanded.

As the most longstanding gue'vesa'vere, and an ex-captain to boot, I took charge of all three gue'vesa squads, and deployed my little band of traitors at the processing centre. It was a big building, roughly one hundred metres each side, curved corners, a fat-bellied frontage that swelled up four storeys to a projecting observation floor. Typical clean tau architecture. Pathfinder snipers were up on the top deck, so we weren't entirely alone. There was only one real entrance, a set of double doors six metres wide and three high. These were securely locked.

'What's the situation inside?' I radioed.

'All calm, gue'vesa'vere,' came a tau voice, oddly modulated by my helmet's translation suite. 'We have displayed your presence to the gue'la captives. Your people are calmed by your actions.'

'As the aun wished it, so we make real,' I said. I don't always remember the formula responses. I'm better at it now than I was then.

I set the other two teams to guard the doors, and took Holyon, Helena, Goliath and Othelliar away to a guard post, the last erection away from the building in the otherwise unfinished quadrant of the city. The post was a small, circular pod, slotted into a predefined space on the city's grid. A curved roof topped it, one wraparound window giving a 360 degree arc of vision. A little like a very squat mushroom. You know the type.

We went inside. There was enough room for all of us. 'We'll get a good view from here,' I said. 'Not that I expect much action.' We watched the interplay of las- and pulse fire around the node, the sparkle of tau energy shielding. I regretted not being involved in the firefight going on around the command node. Now they were out of the forest, the Catachans were having the same problems we did, and no sheltering screens of drones to protect them. But by the Emperor, they were fierce, and where they closed to assault range with the tau, they cut them down with those big jungle knives without mercy. Where we could, we lent fire support, but we were only five, and outside of our guns' effective range.

I was mindful that Skilltalker was in the building behind us. I was relieved he was well out of it, and that he had Krix with him.

CHAPTER SIX

[A green sky is choked with smoke and flies. There are bodies everywhere and a powerful stench. The subject is satisfied with what it has done here. These are traitors. This is the fate of all traitors. Wait. Analogy? The subject seeks to communicate its defiance and fury at the gue'vesa. Remarkable. It defies the nagi, whom none can defy. Collectives refocused. Earth caste intensification machinery operating at 87% of tolerance. Mind rip operational.]

I am in a dying jungle. A single squad, Ebon Wing, is with me. My squad, battle-brothers for many years. I have fought with these adepts for long lifetimes of men.

Captain Odell of the Catachan 432nd signals his readiness. Seneschal Contyre of House Terryn indicates to us that he is approaching the xenos construction site. I thank them for their sacrifice. Their chances of escaping Agrellan are slim, and the xenos will treat them harshly should they be caught. They are to begin guerrilla operations once this engagement is concluded. The deployment of the Knight, with little hope of recovery, is a mark of how important our mission is. We must capture one of these water caste forked tongues, and rip his secrets from him. As to that end, all is in place.

We are one hundred and fifty kilometres behind enemy lines. Analysis of previous tau conquest patterns have revealed that colonisation begins immediately, even as victory is being won. Such efficiency is paid for with predictability. We have identified fourteen possible sites for processing and landing facilities. Following the transit of prisoners and the activity of enemy survey teams, we have narrowed this selection down to eight probable sites, then six definite. By tracking the movements of our betrayer of traitors, we determine the correct site. All has proceeded smoothly. It is as we judged, our target is where we predicted.

We move through the arid forest without a sound. The tau are arrogant, so sure of their technology. They do not detect us or our allies as we approach. Their overconfidence will be their undoing.

‘*Swift Vengeance*, we are in position. Await my orders,’ I signal our ship, an escort. A small craft, but fast. One I have the honour of commanding in battle myself. We have two opportunities to take a sample for the biologists; as our target hides here, or when it runs before us. Either will suit me, and I am relaxed, sure of our triumph, one way or the other.

I order another auspex scan of the complex. There are many aliens there, but only a single company of their warriors.

‘Their technology is formidable, brother-sergeant,’ says Brother Usk.

‘And their prowess weak. We will prevail,’ I say. We have studied much of these tau in our cells whilst in transit, especially the details of the punitive expedition into their space during the first crusade. I have little fear that this second crusade will not achieve the same results. We shall cast them back over the Damocles Gulf, and in time cross over ourselves and wreak righteous genocide upon them. Their worlds will burn, become ossuaries, the stacks of their sightless skulls under silent skies testimony to the might of the Imperium.

Such times are in the future. For the moment, I am eager to coat my blade in their vile blood. The shadow captains say that they are worthy foes. That is as may be, but they are alien for all that, and so worthy only of contempt.

A vox pulse, modulated in such a way to avoid detection, reaches me. Colonel Odell and his men are in position. I respond.

‘Attack. May the Emperor be with you.’

‘I yearn to be into the fray,’ says my brother Yuvin. His hands work the grip of his axe. We all feel his impatience.

‘You will have your opportunity soon enough, brother. We must wait until they are fully engaged to the north.’

Gunfire erupts in the distance, on the other side of the clearing from our position. About now, Odell will have sent his wave of penal troopers forward at their prisoner processing facility. An obvious feint. The ‘real’ attack will be directed at the command node. It is imperative that they feel that their leader is under attack if we are to snatch our true target. A fake attack on our real objective to mask our true intentions. Such deception is second nature to us.

I am irritated that I am not to attempt the rendition of one of the alien lords, but every attempt thus far has been a failure, and Shadow Captain Shrike informed me that the consequences for the civilian population here would be dire.

The thump of explosions joins the sounds of lasgun fire. I can hear the

shouting of men.

The forest about me is unclean. The tree boughs are rotten. Dry through and brittle, yet coated with a noxious slime. Shaggy grey beards of moss drip from every branch. The forest floor is slimy with black leaf litter. Little else but the trees grow here, and they are diseased. Cankers afflict many of them, whorled bumps that leak angry red fluids down the trunks. The creatures I have seen are of similar condition. My armour's sensorium warn me of toxins in the air that might tax even my physiology, blessed by the Emperor's gifts as it is. I watch a malformed insect analogue climb painfully up a tree limb, its feeble efforts performed to the accompaniment of repeated battlecannon round detonations. The Seneschal Contyre is engaged. I look again at the insect. This malformed creature faces a battle as great as Contyre in simply searching for food. It reminds me of...

[Danger! Something deep arises from the mind of the subject. A whirl of images confounds us; a fight in a narrow way for stale food. Orange skies. A friend. Yes. This is the source of the resistance. A friend. Female, dirty face, affection in her eyes. She struggles to survive. She struggles to find enough to eat. Memory overlay is in process, emotional resonance threatens to overwhelm us. Earth caste machines at 92%. Mind rip recommences.]

I shake off the memories of my early life. I am a Space Marine. I have a duty to perform. This is not a healthy world. It carries the taint of the warp. I hope the xenos choke upon its poisons when we leave it for them.

'The attack is under way. We shall proceed. As one, brothers, let us ignite our raven's wings and fall upon the xenos and the traitor with rightful anger!'

'Aye, brother-sergeant!' they respond.

We leap skyward together, sending a rain of sickly branches crashing down. The xenos are unaware as to our approach, and we fall upon them with complete surprise. All hail the Emperor of Mankind, all hail His son and our father, Corax, Lord of Ravens.

CHAPTER SEVEN

When we were absorbed in the fight at the command node, that's when things got interesting for us. There was a roar in the sky. I looked up to see the blaze of jump pack jets as black armoured warriors came hurtling down.

Raven Guard. Black armour, white birds on their shoulder pads. Their jump packs howled like monsters, their blocky bolt pistols firing as they descended. All of them were armed for close combat, and they were coming down right on top of my la'rua.

I switched targets, blasting away at the nearest to me. There's enough stopping power in a pulse carbine to put a Space Marine down. One out of his armour, that is. Good as pulse weaponry is, the rounds lack penetrative power. Someone might want to look into that. My shots hit home, forcing him off course. He twisted in the air to correct his flight, and is sent away from his comrades, but not a one got through his armour. Imperial power armour might be less sophisticated than the Crisis suits, but it is still formidable. He landed ten metres away from me with an audible clang. His fellows followed suit, touching down between my diminished squad and the processing centre.

In the next three seconds it became abundantly clear that the command node was not the Space Marines' objective. They didn't attack the fire warriors defending it. This is what I figured they'd be doing, trying to trap us between two forces, make us divide our fire, then get in close where the superior strength of the humans – and especially the Space Marines – would tell. With all due respect, the fire warriors are noble and well-disciplined, but they are not effective melee combatants. If this single squad got in amongst our lines, it was all over. The Raven Guard would go through the best of the shas'la like a hot knife into butter.

But that didn't happen. Instead, the Raven Guard headed straight toward the processing centre where five hundred would-be citizens of the Tau'va were

sheltering. The other two gue'vesa squads there didn't last long. Fourteen dead to not a single Space Marine casualty, blasted to meat by explosive rounds. The Space Marines formed up around the big double doors of the processing centre. I saw one of them turn the door mechanism to slag with his meltagun, and the others force the door. Panicked humans spilled out through the gap, some trying to run, others throwing themselves at the Raven Guards' feet in surrender and dying just the same. I didn't have much time to think on this, as the Space Marine who'd landed separately from his fellows came at me with a burst of his jet, leaping straight at the guard post. Five of us, against one of him. It was not a fight in our favour.

'Get out!' I yelled at my team. I was terrified, could barely speak. They ran backwards, out of the door. I only just managed to dodge out of the way as the Space Marine crashed through the wall and window. I fell sprawling to the floor, only just managing to keep hold of my carbine.

'You are a traitor and will be dealt with as such!' he shouts. His vox-grille had a harsh, primitive sound. 'Prepare to face the judgement of your rightful master, wretch!' he cried. Or something along those lines. I was desperately blasting at his breastplate with my carbine, but again I was foiled by his armour. The others fell back from the command post, wary of the slaughter going on behind them at the building. Ten Space Marines are an enemy to cause a hundred of the mightiest men to pause, and we are not among the mighty.

The Raven Guard loomed over me. Every detail of him is frozen in my memory. Brother Yuvin, he was called, according to the script on his right shoulder pad. His armour was hung with ribbons of parchment, and decorated with many battle honours. A campaign badge was on his right knee. This guy was a veteran of the first order. Funny, I thought, that if things had turned out differently, I'd be wearing that campaign badge too and he'd be about to kill someone else.

He raised his axe. He was huge, four or five times my weight in his wargear, a head and shoulders taller than me and much more massive. The axe alone would have been more than I could lift. There was no way I could fight this man one on one and hope to survive, for all the power earth caste weaponry gave me. The axe came down. Its blade flickered with the tame lightning of a disruption field. I barely threw myself out of the way. The axe carved a long gouge out of the guard post floor, the disruption field banging away as it shattered atomic bonds and sent the fabric of the floor to ash. I scrambled backward in a sitting position. I fired at him again. I didn't even think of going for my combat knife, there was absolutely no point. As it was, I might as well have been throwing gravel at rockcrete for all the damage my weapon did.

I prepared to die a traitor's death.

CHAPTER EIGHT

We tear through their undefended rear with great fury. Their automated guns, driven by unclean spirits, are silenced by Brother Horsk's meltagun. His artistry with this weapon is unsurpassed in our Sixth Company, in all the Chapter I would argue. I have willingly taken wagers on this matter, and have won most.

Down onto a small group of their warriors we fall. They are obscured by my exhaust trail as I descend. My entire being shakes with the thrust of my jump pack, making my vision blur. It is not until my boot soles ring upon the unfinished plazas of their illegal settlement that I notice the nature of our foe. They are humans, traitors who have turned their back upon the Emperor of Mankind and thrown their lot in with these xenos. It is then that I see the tracing pulse blink brightly. This is the correct place then. I am pleased with the efficacy of our intelligence.

What would make these men turn? I think. Some say that the tau are progressive, and their offers of equality and friendship are sincere. I am no fool. I do not believe as Biologian Tulk believes, and Inquisitor Gallius half believes, that there is some psychic or biochemical coercion at play. I doubt Tulk has seen much of the Imperium beyond the precincts of his own forge worlds. Gallius most certainly has, but men such as he are as preoccupied as the likes of Tulk; they see their task before them and are so blinded to the greater picture. In my quieter moments, after conflict, I have wondered at the injustice I see in the worlds I have visited, for it brings to mind the terrible woes our Primarch Corax suffered himself at the hands of the Technarchy of Deliverance before their rule was overthrown by the Emperor in aeons past. I can understand the temptation the tau present. These water caste need nothing more than half meant promises of freedom. On many worlds long forgotten, this would be enough to sway the hearts of men.

But this they do not understand – the alien is perfidious in his ways, they

cannot be trusted to keep to their oaths. Their codes of honour, if they possess them, are different to ours, and one cannot rely on their word. It is said by the Ecclesiarchy that mankind is the apex of evolution, that there is no higher form of life. If there were, the preachers say, then why are the sons of Terra so numerous? The tau believe it is their destiny to rule the stars. In actuality, they are nothing but pretenders.

And no matter how fine the inducement, there is no excuse for treachery. We dwell in a time of suffering, so that mankind might persist. Who is to shirk this responsibility? No man, whether he be the lowliest servitor or the highest adept of whatever order, low-born, noble, savage or civilised has the right to decide his own fate thus. To turn one's back upon the Emperor is to deny Him one's service, and in doing so to deny one's service to Mankind as a whole. I do not deny my service. I do suffer in His name for all humanity. What then am I to think of those I protect turning their hand against me, no matter their situation?

So I have understanding of their decisions, but I have no sympathy.
Sympathy...

[A further emotional resonance disrupts the rip briefly. It is tied with the memory of the companion. There is the sensation of soft lips upon his, a fleeting sign of affection long ago, but it is an important memory for him, no matter how deeply buried. There is but a shadow that passes over our reading, and it is gone.]

I think all this as I land and eviscerate four of them with my bolt pistol, one shot apiece. They do not have time to react. Their xenos-gifted equipment is admirable, but cannot stand against the arms of the Emperor. Their deaths are just. I feel no shame. They have betrayed us all.

We are into the processing centre easily. Weapons fire patters off me as the traitors recover their wits. The rounds of the traitors' guns are strong, but lacking in the necessary mass to penetrate our battleplate. Their energies are quickly absorbed by the layers underlying the adamantium and plasteel of my war harness's outer shell. The rest die at our hands. Horsk melts the locking mechanism. By the time he and I have prised open the door, the servo mechanisms and fibre bundles of our armour thrumming with the effort, the majority of the human traitors guarding the facility are dead. I spare a quick glance for my visor's tactical overlay. Yuvin has been separated from us, but is engaging a smaller group of human traitors. He will keep.

'Quickly! Into the atrium! Our targets are within.'

I, Raayvak, Kolinthinor, Roak, Kaaw and Horsk follow our grenades into the interior. The lights go out, either turned off to hinder us or extinguished by our

attack, I cannot tell. Men are screaming. Many run for the doors, some prostrate themselves. All are met by fire from Usk, Braakor and Kanthin outside. I consider telling them to cease their fire, each and every one of the men inside here are Imperial soldiers, but they are also potential turncoats, else they would not be in such a centre, and none will ever leave Agrellan unless it be under tau colours. Better that ten good men die so that the eleventh not raise arms against the Emperor.

The confusion works in our favour. My visor picks in outline the tau whisperers. My armour's cogitators analyses their badges and markings. None are of high rank. They are not the one we seek. I shoot them down. Then, I have him. A positive match with the images given to me by Shrike. An officer of their diplomatic corps. More, he is the specific officer.

'There! That one! Take him!' I point. The tau looks right back at me, but does not run. He is wounded, but lightly. Is he in shock? Some species have feeble constitutions.

Roak makes for him. The others are hacking at the rest of the Tau's whisperers. They shove men out of their way, chopping them down if they do not move. Many do not. Some are certainly dazed, others perhaps seek to protect their captors. How fickle is men's loyalty.

Shouts over my vox. A scream. I bring up the vital signs of my squad. Yuvin is dead. I look out of the door. Bulky shapes are coming down outside, the tau commander and her bodyguard. Here is a challenge for us. Their armour is powerful, mounting many weapons systems of great efficiency. But the tau are by nature, or have been made by reliance on such devices, soft and weak. In combat they are no match for us.

I ignite my jets, setting ablaze a huddle of men. I fly from the building, axe swinging. I barge one elite from my path, and damage another with a blow from my axe. It hops back quickly on the flame spears of its own flight unit. Threat indicators blink with urgency in many parts of my helmet. The bodyguard all carry melta-type weapons. They are falling back to bring them to bear, boxing me in. Their skills are lesser, but their flight packs are quicker than ours. I stand to lose most of my squad.

By the command node, the Catachans' attack is faltering. More of the tau are turning their attention to our fight.

There is no honour to be had dying here. I check the trace in my visor. The betrayer of traitors is close by, very close, and lives.

'Fall back, oh brothers of the Raven. Melt into the shadows!'

My men obey. Three – Yuvin, Usk and Kolinithor are down. Yuvin and Usk dead, Kolinithor hindered by a damaged jump pack. He struggles to shuck it off.

I watch as he is attacked from two sides. As he goes for the enemy on his left, a plasma round from the right lays him low.

With regret I notice Roak has not caught the water caste, although last I saw he had him gripped around the chest.

‘Success eludes us,’ he communicates. ‘Alas I was driven off by the ferocity of a xenos slave-guard.’ A deep furrow has been scored across his breastplate, but he is not harmed. I am glad. For Roak to be bested by a xenos, it must have been ferocious indeed.

‘Fall back!’ I cry. I would feel shame in our failure, if failure it were. But to fight with wisdom is the mark of our order, and there are other plans afoot. I contact Brother Raavan, serving as commander in my stead aboard the *Swift Vengeance*, and bid him make ready. The hunt is on. The hunt...

Attack from the shadows, I think. Like the gods who dwell on the moon. Always from the shadows. I am a boy again. I will have my vengeance.

[Another hunt. We are losing him. We must be careful. His sanity is in the balance. This mind rip is torturing us all. He remembers. He remembers things long ago. He defies us. We are on a walkway, a sliver of stolen metal in our hands, waiting. Waiting for the man who defiled the one we loved; our companion. He defies us!]

CHAPTER NINE

O'Hye'esera was there, the three 'ui in her Crisis team in close support. She came rocketing in like the Raven Guard had, only with more grace. They too fired as they landed. There was a cry of pain from behind me. The air shimmered with the beams of the Crisis team's fusion guns. One of the Raven Guard was vaporised where he stood. The one about to kill me was distracted just long enough for me to roll out of the way of his killing blow. Before he could recover, a line of searing blue plasma packets hammered into his side. He was flung sideways as they detonated against his armour. Droplets of red-hot metal sprayed everywhere, some of it catching me and charring its way through my combat suit. By the time I'd batted it off my flesh and got to my feet, the after-images the plasma burst had burned into my vision were dimming, and I was treated to the sight of the Raven Guard falling back on jets of orange fire. Three of their number were dead or dying, and had been abandoned. Helena was down, not too far off. It didn't look good for her. Holyon was a bloody smear across the construction matrix.

I looked at the one who'd nearly ended me. He was dead, his arms flung out, the power plant on the back of his armour ruptured and leaking coolant everywhere. His armour had been stripped of paint by the plasma. In places it still glowed dull red, where it had cooled it was discoloured with heat; grey with a purplish sheen. A gaping hole was in his side, the flesh and bone within charred black. Wisps of smoke escaped his broken eye lenses.

So died a champion of humanity. I felt no triumph. I'd been raised on stories of the valour of such men since the cradle. If anything, I felt sick, like I'd finally crossed a line I could never go back over. Sure, I've killed a lot of men in my time, most of them for the Greater Good, and I hadn't been responsible for the death of this warrior. But this was not a man who had died, this was a Space Marine.

I'd been party to the slaying of a hero of my kind.

Tau'va.

I still don't like to think about it.

The racket of battle receded. My body flooded with stored-up fear, and I started to tremble. I felt sick. It's always the way after a fight for humans, it's a chemical thing in our brains, so I've been told.

'The gue'la are retreating! All units, stand down and return to your posts. O'Hye'esera, prosecute pursuit as you see fit. Earth caste prepare for resumption of duties.' That was the Ethereal Aun'kira. He'd got through unharmed then. Looking at the node, it had taken minimal damage. Away to the north, the sounds of firing diminished. I caught sight of the Knight retreating, energy field cast around its back as it pounded across the dirt and vanished into the woods. Aircraft were coming in from the east, nine of them, ready to hunt it down. By far the most damaging element of the Imperial raid, the Knight left scores dead, and several wrecks burning, not least the shattered remnants of the Riptide. Smoke billowed from its own side where it had been holed, but it had definitely come off better from the encounter. Volley fire from our own side became erratic as fire warrior la'rua broke forward in pursuit. From the vox-chatter, they were taking it carefully. The Catachans were falling back with discipline. This was no rout. Their objective had certainly been to distract us from the Space Marines attack, and it had been fulfilled. There was no reason for them to stick around and die.

'Goliath! Othelliar! Come in.' The remainder of my squad reported back. They weren't far from me, the rush of battle stopped me from seeing them, even though they were practically in front of me, you know? We rejoined each other.

'Helena?' asked Goliath. He had a soft spot for her, and his voice was shaky.

'Hit, I don't know if she's dead or not, Holyon's had it,' I said, pointing at the chunks that had been our mendacious friend. As it turned out, Helena wasn't dead, but she lost her left arm just above the elbow. A bolt took her there. The shrapnel from its explosion would've killed her, were it not for her armour, for which I give thanks to the earth caste. I hear her rehabilitation's going well, and that she'll be able to rejoin the gue'vesa auxilliary corps soon enough.

I didn't know any of that at the time, I suspected she was dead but didn't want to have to deal with the fallout of saying that to Goliath. My head was swimming with the after-effects of the fight. I had to pull it together. 'Fio'la medical teams are on their way,' I said. 'We'll have to leave Helena in their hands now. Come on, let's check on the por'el. I've got a bad feeling from all this. This wasn't a random raid.'

I went to the processing centre. People in disposable respirators were

streaming from it, shepherded under the guns of shas'la. There was a fan of bodies lying around the main entrance, blasted to pieces. Although I'd watched the Space Marines gun them down, my earlier assumption that the enemy were going for the prisoners was wrong. The casualties among the gue'la prisoners were collateral damage.

The same couldn't be said for the dead water caste.

'Help the shas'la!' I ordered Goliath and Othelliar. 'I'm going to find the por'el.' I ran into the building. The poles and light ribbons that divided up the space into orderly areas for queuing were all smashed down. Fires guttered in bolt-round craters in the walls. The lights were out, and the sun shining in through the open doors did not reach all the corners. Smoke writhed blue as it crossed the square of illumination, a square that picked out a tableau of bloody horrors just for me. Here, a pair of fio'la medics sought to stabilise a human whose legs were tattered ribbons. He was shaking and coughing up blood, jerkily moving forward as he tried to sit. The fio'la held his hands and babbled soothing-sounding Tau'noh'por at him. In front of me, a circle of twisted limbs and broken torsos were laid out like the petals of a bloody flower around the crater of a grenade detonation. People were screaming and crying. Medics were running around, frantically handing out breathing masks. Fire warriors were hauling shell-shocked prisoners of war out of the hall. And dotted around, the corpses of water caste. Half a dozen of them were dead, hacked brutally apart.

I began to panic.

'Por'el Skilltalker!' I called. 'Skilltalker? Skilltalker!'

I shoved at the milling humans, searching for a glimpse of blue skin amid brown, black and white.

'Calm yourself, gue'vre. I live.'

I span around, searching for him.

'I am behind you, against the wall.' His mellifluous voice was croaky with smoke, and perhaps the poison of the air – the atmosphere scrubbers were off, and the toxins of the outside had worked their way inside.

I spotted him, and hurried over. He was having a wound dressed in his arm. One sleeve of his robe had been cut away to allow access to it. His-ever present water caste hat was missing, and the comms vane he wore in his ear opening torn away. I was relieved to see a medical respirator had been pushed on his face. He was spattered all over in tau and human blood.

I slung my carbine and dropped to my knees beside him, earning myself a look of annoyance from the medic. I didn't care. 'Are you all right, por'el?'

'I am touched by your concern, Gue'vesa'vre J'ten,' he said. He sounded wearier than I'd ever heard him. He was troubled by the carnage, and his eyes

did not meet mine.

‘Por’el, I am done here,’ said the medic. ‘There is minimal damage. The wound on your arm is not deep. You will have bruising on your chest from where you were grabbed, but nothing more.’

Skilltalker flexed his hand and nodded. His wiry muscles moved under the plastic dressing. ‘Thank you, fio’la. Now go, many others are in greater need of your attention.’

I stood and extended my hand. Skilltalker grasped it and I pulled him to his feet. He dusted himself down, but this only smeared blood over his robes. He held his hands up and frowned at them.

‘Grabbed you? They were coming for you, to capture you,’ I said. ‘That was what this was all about.’

He looked at me a moment, then smiled. ‘Why yes, friend J’ten. Of course. Many of the Imperium’s worlds have elected to join with us for our mutual benefit. Your erstwhile masters are so blinkered in thought that they assume we have some covert means of encouraging treachery. Perhaps they impute uncanny powers to us, as they do to our beloved ethereals.’ He laughed. ‘Do not be so discouraged. This is a sign that the Imperium is desperate, that they attack the talker and do not address our words. But then, words cannot be so easily killed. It is easier to fight a tangible foe.’

‘If that is so, we have to get you to the command node, to sit this out,’ I said. ‘Come on, we’ll escort you.’

‘No, friend J’ten. I have been ordered to depart the world for the safety of the Kor’vattra support cadres until the conquest is complete. Apparently I am too valuable to risk, something of great flattery to me, but I’d rather stay here and help the effort at the front. Still, needs must, I go where the Greater Good requires, not where I desire.’ Something funny came over his face when he said that. He displaced it with a smile. ‘You and your squad are to come with me.’

‘Holyon’s dead. I think Helena is too.’

His face fell. ‘I am sorry to hear that. They died for us all.’

‘Tau’va,’ I said reflexively.

‘Tau’va,’ he responded. ‘I will personally ensure your comrades’ remains are treated with great honour. They were good friends, and served well.’

‘I am grateful. How long until we depart?’

‘A ship will arrive soon to extract us.’

‘Wait,’ I said. ‘I’m probably speaking out of turn here, but my oath is to protect you. If you go, you’ll be in flight and vulnerable. The Space Marines are rightly named, they are expert void fighters, and their ships are among the swiftest in the Imperium. I might be wrong, but I’ve got a feeling they mean to

draw you out so that you might be more easily caught, por'el. We should stay here. You'll be much safer. The conquest is almost done.'

That strange expression flickered over his face, a medley of alien and human expressions that I could not read. He knew something I did not, although that might just be me convincing myself retrospectively. He grasped my shoulder with his uninjured hand. 'I go where the Greater Good demands, J'ten. These are my orders, from Aun'Va himself, and you are to go with me.'

'Obey without question, as the river flows downhill without complaint,' I quoted. Sometimes I think it's easy for the tau proper. You obey the aun without thinking. It's hard for some of us to act so.

'Just so, just so.' He patted me.

I looked up and around the ruined room. 'And Krix, where is he? They didn't get him did they?' I said.

The por'el shook his head. 'No. He will be eating. He finds it harder than some to suppress his kroot appetites, but he is a fearsome warrior and a loyal guard. I forgive him his lapses. Now, gather your men. The kor'la will be here for us shortly.'

CHAPTER TEN

About five minutes later, we were on the landing field, the bulk of a Manta spinning slowly in the air as it lined itself up to land. They're so big it looked like it was directly above us, but when it landed there was a good fifty metres to cover, and I hustled the por'el to it faster than decorum allows. We went in the back hatch, past the hangar with its empty drone and battlesuit racks. We made all haste to the upper deck. The craft was empty; everything it had brought down was off fighting, and being in there in all that unoccupied space did nothing for my nerves.

'We are ready to depart, por'el.' The kor'ui pilot's announcement came out of nowhere, straight into our helmets.

'Very well. Let us make all haste away from here,' says Skilltalker.

Goliath and Othelliar strapped themselves in. Krix took the seat on the left of the por'el, I on the right.

There was a lurch, then the stomach-dropping sensation of sudden acceleration. I was pressed back into my seat. The speed these things take off at pushes us humans right to the limit, I swear. I've seen Kor'la pull off manoeuvres that would make a human black out. The muscles on my face were dragged downwards, I felt the skin on my face rippling with the force of the take-off, and then zero-gravity, and the sensation grew less as the craft stopped accelerating. A second later, the artificial gravity snapped on. T'au standard. Lighter than is entirely comfortable for a human, but a damn sight better than nothing.

Skilltalker had his eyes closed, his head leaning back on the rests of his seat. Rows of seats stretched away either side of him, each with their straps neatly folded. The empty ethereal's throne at the prow end of the cabin moved against some force I could not feel.

'Por'el, are you all right?' I said.

‘What?’ His eyes slid open in that slow tau way. ‘Oh yes, yes, I am fine. You are doing an exemplary job, friend J’ten. I will commend you to fire caste auxiliary command.’

‘Yeah, well. Thanks,’ I said grudgingly. I wasn’t sure that I really wanted too much attention at that stage. I was still shaken up over the death of the Space Marine, for all that he’d nearly killed me. ‘Are you sure you’re okay?’

Skilltalker clucked his tongue. ‘Now you are worrying over me as a class mother worries over her teaching batch! I am fine. I have been in worse situations than this, many times over. I think I better ask you, are you all right?’

‘Have you ever faced Space Marines before?’ I asked abruptly.

Skilltalker gave a little shiver. ‘No, no I have not. And formidable they were.’ He smiled. ‘But as strong as they may be, friend J’ten, the Greater Good is stronger, far too strong to be overcome by a handful of gue’ron’sha. Do not fear them.’

‘I do fear them,’ I admitted. ‘And I feel shame at their deaths.’

Skilltalker rested his head against the seat back and closed his eyes again. ‘That is regrettable, but understandable. These are heroes from your culture. Complete assimilation into the Tau’va typically takes a viviparous, child-caring, pair-bonding species of your lifespan three generations. I had hoped that you were coming along more swiftly.’ He did not sound disappointed, but chuckled at the back of his throat. A pleasant sound, water on stones. ‘Pardon me. I do not laugh at you, but at myself.’ He opened his eyes again, and they twinkled with good humour. ‘I made a wager with Por’ui Ka’shato as to your complete becoming in the Tau’va. It seems I have lost.’

I must have looked a little dismayed, as he moved to reassure me.

‘Never mind! It is a better thing, I hold, that the non-tau that choose to join us in the Tau’va do not entirely lose that which makes them what they are. As we of the five castes are different, and better for it, then so too is it good that each species within the Tau’va is different from the others. And although I was impressed by your embracing of the Tau’va, I am glad to have been wrong as to the extent. Why, friend J’ten, I like you the way you are! I trust you. You have proven your loyalty and utility to the Tau’va again and again.’ He smiled broadly, showing off his flawless, broad, grey teeth, and touched my arm with the back of his hand. I’m sure there were a whole load of subtle body language cues he was giving off that I missed. ‘I am glad that you are at my side. Truly.’

‘Thank you,’ I said. I wished I could see out of the Manta, but there are no windows or viewing displays in the passenger cabin. Was a night-black ship slipping after us? Were we being targeted by the weapons systems of the Adeptus Astartes? I hate flying. I’m not frightened by it, you understand. But I

hate the feeling of powerlessness I have. A missile could come right at us and there'd be nothing I could do about it. If I were the pilot, at least I could take my own life into my own hands. But I couldn't. I was entirely dependent on the efforts of others. I know this is a key part of the Tau'va, the driving philosophy of it, this trust in those around you, but there we are. You wanted honesty.

We dozed a little, all of us except Krix. I never saw that kroot take a nap. Not once. Do they even sleep? I woke a little before we docked, feeling sticky and stiff. I longed to take a shower. Goliath's head was lolling, a string of dribble coming out of his mouth. Othelliar was staring into the middle distance, his jaw working on his own teeth, eyes full of an anger I didn't like.

Then there was the ungentle push of deceleration, which went on until I nearly couldn't bear it. A slight bump, and the kor'ui pilot announced our arrival at the Kor'vattra *Dah'kolsuio*.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

[The man dies, hot blood pours over the boy's hand. He has taken him unawares, as his friend was taken unawares. Tears as warm as the man's blood runs down the boy's face, not for his friend's shame and hurts, but for this act of murder. This is the first life he has taken, and the boy is ashamed by it. Vengeance is not the cure to the pain in his heart he thought it would be, but instead adds more bitter emotions to his suffering. The man's eyes widen, he sinks into the knife in his gut. His hands paw feebly at the boy's shoulders. The boy grits his teeth, twists the knife and withdraws it. The man slumps further onto the boy. 'Why?' is his last word. The boy does not answer, but pushes him from the edge of the walkway. He wipes at his face as the body falls fifty storeys to the dark streets. The blood from his hands leaves blood upon the boy's lip, warm as that single kiss. He retreats into the shadows, and never truly emerges again. With this the subject defies us, albeit by now on an entirely subconscious level. Earth caste machines at 97%. Mind rip recommences.]

I address my squad. 'We have lost three good brothers to the xenos. Their response was impressive and their weaponry is deadly, even to those as well-gifted and armoured as we. This is a foe that deserves respect. Judge them not by their decadent philosophy, nor by their small stature, nor by their grandiose claims to superiority. They may be as children compared to the storied histories of mankind, but their toys are no less dangerous.'

There are nods of agreement from my brethren. The Thunderhawk bucks in thermals coming fast off the parched jungles of Agrellan, the craft creaks and bangs. Such perturbations in the atmosphere do not trouble us. Death does not trouble us. Both are minor inconveniences to the fulfilment of our task.

'Be not troubled by our initial failure, for our target has been driven from his hide, and even now runs unknowingly into the arms of greater dangers.'

An alarm sounds in the pilot's cabin, almost inaudible in the passenger deck. The ship swings to the side, we hear the hum of power packs giving out their energies as the laser cannons fire. The ship resumes its course. The alarms cease; whatever threat there was has been dealt with.

We arrive upon *Swift Vengeance*. Raavan greets us via the vox as the Thunderhawk lands within the strike cruiser's hangar.

'Our prey is sighted. We fly in pursuit.'

We disembark. The building howl of the reactor fills the ship as *Swift Vengeance* makes all speed to catch our enemy.

Squad Silent Talon is readying itself in the arming bay, the brothers leaving their commands aboard the vessel in the hands of our serfs. Only Raavan and our brother Techmarines, of all we initiates, will remain on the ship.

We strip our weapons and clean them, untroubled by the acceleration. Our Techmarines come out from the Thunderhawk and check over our wargear. Serfs from the forge chant the mysteries of Mars as they effect minor repairs. Major damage is assessed. Severed power lines spark as Roak's chestplate is removed, the plastron beneath adjusted. A spare piece of armour is brought out from the stores, and his battleplate made whole again with much chanting of prayer. Other such exchanges are undergone by several of my brothers. A new greave here, a different gauntlet there. Several of these fresh provided are unpainted. Each brother is responsible for his wargear, his own will be repaired and returned to his care. For now, expediency is our master.

Brother Rayvaak's bolt pistol has a malfunctioning ammo feed, and so he takes a different weapon. Serfs bring crates of fresh ammunition. We speak the litanies of victory as we refill our magazines, sing the battle songs once sung by Corax himself as we string new grenades from our belts. The coolant systems in our power plants are connected to maintenance shrines and refilled. Auspexes are connected to our armour, the tech-priests run their tests. More adjustments to our equipment is made. Fibre bundles are recalibrated, poor signal transmissions addressed, telemetry aligned between the cogitators. A faulty helmet is removed from Brother Huk of Squad Silent Talon during this checking.

We spend the remainder of the journey making our battlegear as clean as possible. It is improper to enter the fray with the sigils and badges of our order obscured. As we polish our battered plate, the *Swift Vengeance* steals closer to its target. The xenos craft has taken aboard our prey, and broken free from the fleet besieging Agrellan. No doubt fierce battle is being waged in the heavens over the hive worlds, as the tau strive to prevent Lord Severax's evacuation. We do not request news on this engagement, nor is any offered. Our minds are on our mission and our mission alone.

We are ready.

‘Xenos craft approaching,’ Sergeant Raavan informs us.

We are up and towards the boarding torpedo tubes. The *Swift Vengeance* is equipped with four. We shall require only one. It is a rare time when our Chapter is present in sufficient numbers to require more.

The circular door at the rear irises open. We go through, one at a time, and take our places either side of the torpedo’s central aisle, two rows of ten in single file.

Frames rise from the floor. We place ourselves within them. Magnetic locks activate, holding our battleplate in place. We are standing, ready to deploy the moment the torpedo burns its way through the aliens’ hull.

We are silent. Our way is that of introspection. Each of us dwells on our own concerns at this final moment. The faint push of the ship’s constant acceleration decreases, and then my body is being pulled in another direction as the braking jets are fired. There is a rumble and a shudder runs through the craft. We have been observed, and now the two ships are exchanging fire. This is also not our concern. We trust to Raavan and our serfs to see us safely aboard.

‘Torpedo launching,’ comes a voice. A terse advisement.

More forces play upon me as the torpedo’s rockets fire. Their roar fills the cabin, my helmet’s aural senses dampen automatically to protect my hearing. The torpedo shakes mightily. I am pushed hard into the magnetic frame as the torpedo accelerates fast toward its target. Such pressure is hard for me to take, a lesser man would perhaps not survive it. A crushing pressure upon my chest, black spots in my vision. It is difficult to breathe. This will pass, I tell myself, and it duly does. The acceleration cuts out, and so does the pressure. There is a faint sense of push and pull as the torpedo’s attitude jets keep it locked on to the xenos ship. There are few of these, the craft must not be attempting much in the way of evasive manoeuvres. The shockwave of an explosion buffets the torpedo, but we are taking little fire. The melta weaponry on the prow of the torpedo activates with a deep hum. A fraction of a second later, the torpedo impacts upon the hull of the alien vessel. The mag-locks hold me in place, but I feel my internal organs shift with the force of it.

As the torpedo burns its way into the hull, machinery grinds, tracks on the outside of our assault boat. The meltas burn, the tracks pull, and the torpedo burrows its way within the xenos ship.

It all stops of a sudden. There is a hiss from the outside as the torpedo sprays sealant foam around itself. Atmospheric decompression is not desirable in this situation, lest we destroy the integrity of the ship, or slay our target unintentionally through suffocation.

The front of the torpedo opens, four petals gaping wide. We step out into a softly curved corridor littered with debris and ripples of cooling metal. Steam and smoke billow around us. Alarms jangle. We are aboard. Weapons rattle against plasteel chests, boots clang on the deck. My brothers spread out. I order Kaaw to take four of Squad Ebon Wing and head towards the prow, where the bridge is situated. The rest of us, some twelve, I order sternwards.

‘Our quarry is near. We start the search to the rear.’

The pulse of the betrayer of traitors’ cranial implant pulses steadily in my visor.

‘Yes, brother-sergeant,’ they say, and we are on our way to victory.

CHAPTER TWELVE

We were taking refreshments in the gallery of the diplomacy lounge when the alarms went off. The Raven Guard had done it again, coming in at us unawares somehow. There was barely time to register the blare of the proximity warning systems before the ship heeled hard to starboard in avoidance. The motion of it fought the gravity plating of the deck, and our drinks and food were sent spilling off the table on peculiar trajectories. The entire vessel shook with the shockwaves of near misses from another starship's weapons. The ship twitched as it expelled mass rounds by the thousand in reply.

Whatever the ship was trying to dodge hit us anyway. A tearing bang and the squealing of metal was followed by the rush of fusion cutters. An explosion announced the arrival of the Raven Guard on the *Dah'kolsuio*.

The gallery looked out over a wider lounge. Seating areas, a table at the centre of each, were set in protruding, circular sections of the gallery. A long, straight landing ran alongside. The whole set-up was designed to impress potential new members of the Tau'va. Plants in pots, examples of tau art and architecture, models, interactive displays of technology, that kind of thing. It was all very appealing in that slightly bland, sinuous tau way, a good place to thrash out the deals of accession, or have a quick meal like us. It was, however, a lousy place for a firefight.

We snatched up our gear quickly, put our helmets on and checked our guns. The prow-ward doors opened, and fire warriors came running down the gallery, their armour was the standard night blue pattern of space troopers. These shas'la had been training their whole lives for void combat and ship actions, but they were up against the best in the galaxy, and I didn't think their skills or numbers would prove to be enough.

The Space Marines were there quickly, like they knew exactly where they were going.

The sound of the battle in the enclosed space was terrific. Even with the audio dampers on my helmet my ears were ringing with the rapid triple bangs of bolt-rounds – expulsion, acceleration, explosion. I had Por’el Skilltalker shoved down in cover. By this time, I had no doubt that he was the target. They were going to slaughter us all and spirit him off to Emperor alone knows what torment. I was not going to let that happen. Every time he tried to rise, I shoved him back. In the main, humans are stronger than tau, and the water caste are not the strongest of the castes. It was no trouble for me.

I looked around. There was a door a quick scramble back from the balcony, leading from the lounge into a service way. Away from the table and the gallery’s enclosing, low wall, there was a clear line of fire up the landing. When I tried to link into the tau tacnet I couldn’t. My helmet displays were full of static snow. I’m pretty sure it was being jammed, and so my understanding of the wider situation was severely limited. I attempted to get a look over the balcony wall down into the lower hall, but I didn’t even get the top of my helmet over the lip before a spray of bolts drove me back. A couple sped overhead, propellant flaring at the rear, two more smacked into the wall in front of me, one blowing a smoking hole out of it on our side. I threw myself onto Skilltalker as shards of composites pattered around us.

Skilltalker was trying to talk, looking at me beseechingly. I think he was trying to tell me that he was going to surrender. I don’t recall the exact words, but I remember shouting ‘no’ at him several times. I got angry with him, I am sure of that.

‘We have to get him out of here before the Space Marines make it up the stairs onto the gallery!’ I called to Goliath and Othelliar. The pair of them were firing down over the edge of the balcony at the Space Marines. Goliath was sniping, ice cold. The fire warrior at his side was flung backwards from the rails, pulse rifle clattering over the edge. He staggered a few steps before being thrown further backwards as the bolt in his chest blew, spraying us with his viscera. Goliath didn’t even flinch as blood ran off his helmet, but carried on calmly shooting. Othelliar was wilder. I couldn’t see his face behind his helmet, but I guessed that he was snarling with hatred at the Emperor’s elite. He was losing it, and turning into a liability.

Goliath quit firing soon enough, I had to order Othelliar to give it up, and he did so only reluctantly.

‘Shas’ui! Shas’ui!’ I called, beckoning to the fire warrior leader. It took me a couple of attempts.

‘I am going to get the por’el out of here,’ I said in badly mangled Tau’noh’por. A lot of tau have difficulty understanding human accents, we can’t hit the higher

notes, can't control our pitch vibrato properly, and the multiple glottal stops are murder on our throats. He got my drift. 'The service door!' I shouted.

A missile streaked overhead, tearing a chunk out of the roof. Wiring fell through in a bundle, sparking madly. A large part of the gallery's lights went out. Fires had taken in various places, I think the Space Marines were spraying promethium around down there. The ship's life support must have taken a hit too, as the air was filling with poisonous black smoke. Retardant foams sprayed fitfully from the ceiling, but all the systems in the room were taking a pounding, and the fires were winning.

'O'Va'Dem will be here soon,' he said. Their commander. A new one on me, I didn't recognise the words that made up his name.

'I'm going now,' I said. 'If commander arrives, por'el still in danger. Gue'ron'sha take him. They come up stairs, they kill us all. They take him away. I take him from here, you hold enemy at bay!'

The shas'ui said nothing. I cursed my human throat. I'd just spewed a garbled mess of noise at him. 'We go now!' I said as clearly as I could, pointing at myself and then Skilltaker.

Bolt-rounds were speeding up the gallery by now. I'd lost a good chance to get out trying to make myself understood. Pulse rounds were being traded on an almost equal basis for the Space Marine's miniature rockets, making our way out a perilous crossing over a shooting gallery.

'I will give myself over to them!' said the por'el. 'There has been enough bloodshed.'

We both ignored him. 'Get ready,' I said. 'Do you understand?' I said to the shas'ui.

The shas'ui nodded, and beckoned three of his warriors over.

'Cover the gallery so that Por'el Skilltaker may make his escape,' he told them. The door opened to receive us.

'Cease fire!' the shas'ui ordered. Immediately, pulse fire dropped off. The three fire warriors ran into the corridor, between the bolter fire and our escape door. We followed right behind, keeping low. The fire warriors were dropped in short order, spun around by the impact of the bolts and their secondary explosions, selling themselves to shield the por'el and us.

'Tau'va!' one cried as he died. Othelliar shrieked. He stumbled into the service corridor.

We were through the door. Me, Krix, Othelliar and Skilltaker.

Othelliar was frantic, clawing at his helmet. There was a crack in it.

'Let me look! Let me look!' I said, pushing his hands out of the way. I reached around and snapped off the seals. The moment it came away, Othelliar calmed.

The round had not penetrated, but the impact had shivered the material, and a sliver of the composites that made up the helmet had pierced his scalp. The source of the pain removed, he calmed down, although blood was running down his face.

‘You okay?’ I said. I had to shout over the racket outside. ‘We need to get out of here!’

‘Where’s Goliath?’ he gasped.

Goliath. I spun around, still in a crouch.

In the corridor, Goliath was on the floor, hand outstretched. A red chunk the size of both my fists clasped had been taken out of his side.

He stared at me for a moment, then fell dead. You’d think there’d be something in a look like that. Wondering, or pain, or anger, but there was nothing there, nothing at all.

Heavier weapons fire sounded from the gallery below. The shriek of tau plasma weapons and the puffy explosions they made, the soft but dangerous burr of a burst cannon. I caught sight of a battlesuit, a design I’d never seen before, rise over the edge of the balcony wall, and then it was gone, diving hard onto the Space Marines below, the barrels of its plasma rifles glowing blue as it spat the stuff of stars at the warriors of the Imperium.

The door slid shut, cutting us off from the sounds of the battle.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

My brother Kaaw reports that they have made the bridge with no casualties and minimal contact with the enemy. The pilots have been slain, they say. I order them to scour the area around the bridge, kill all they find, then fall back to the boarding torpedo.

Minimal contact. The same cannot be said for here. We have come out into some kind of refectory, an eating area that is decadently appointed. It is a large place, as much museum or demonstration area as refectory. It curves around with the ship, and I cannot see the far end.

Sculptures and displays shatter under bolter fire. The enemy's returning volleys, the high-energy particles they fire, score the walls around us.

There are many of them. Fifty or so of their fire warriors to begin with, although many are dead. Positioned around the refectory, in its galleries and behind its barbarous alien artworks, they have the advantage of numbers, cover and height. But we are the Space Marines of the Emperor, the Raven Guard. We are the mightiest warriors of the galaxy, and they are dying.

Three of my brothers have worked their way up to the gallery where they have caught sight of the diplomat. He is pinned in place with his treacherous human guardians. In a short time we shall have him, and we will depart this ship.

Pulse fire whistles through the air all around us. Six of us hold the entrance to the refectory. The other three work their way forwards, awaiting bursts of covering fire from us as they run from cover to cover. Brother Huk of Squad Silent Talon carries a flamer, with him go his battle-brothers Colot and Cruk. A grenade arcs in from above, tossed by one of my brethren there. A small group of fire warriors are slain, slumping down when shrapnel pierces them. Under the cover of the explosion, Huk and his companions dash forward again. In the gallery, my brothers slay three of the enemy, take position in one of the protrusions that decorate the gallery's length, and open fire from above. The fire

warriors below are driven to hide, those that seek to dislodge my warriors from their new vantage are slain, for there is only a long corridor by which each of the small eating areas are accessed, and they are quickly cut down as they approach.

This time Huk, Colot and Cruk do not seek cover.

A whumph of igniting promethium, and flame spreads all over the lower part of the refectory. Aliens scream shrilly. The volume of fire coming from their part of the hall falls off dramatically, then so does our own as our potential targets are laid low.

[Fire. He remembers fire. Another fleeting intrusion. The fires of polluting refineries belching poisons at the night. The fires of the sky warriors' ships as they descend that fateful day. The fires of a hundred burning worlds. Earth caste machines at 98%. Secondary nagi collective down to 29% living membership.]

Fire.

Then, ill news. 'Brother-Sergeant Cornix, the diplomat has escaped into the ship.'

I curse this ill luck. 'Alone?' I ask.

'No, brother-sergeant. Two of the human traitors and the avian xenos went with him.'

I check my signifier. The steady pulse of the beacon implant beats true yet. It appears that we must rely on Gallius's gambit.

'All is not lost,' I say. My brother does not reply, but I sense the confusion in his hesitation. 'We are the masters of secrets,' I say. 'We keep what we need to keep close by our breast, for no other to know.' It is explanation enough for him; this is the way of our Chapter.

'Brother-sergeant!' Huk has time to cry out before he is cut down. His fire tipped the balance towards us, but the smoke and flames have allowed the foe's elites to approach unobserved. Now comes the true test.

They come in through the choking broil of the fire, weapons spitting. Five of them, their armour painted in the same blues and blacks as the fire warriors. One levels a plasma gun at Huk's remaining companions. A bolt of incandescent gas bursts through the chest of Cruk. Fire leaps from his eye lenses as he is consumed. They are led by one larger. His armour is of different design entirely, and coloured a bright crimson. He attacks with terrible ferocity, and Colot goes down to join his dead brothers. We honour their sacrifice for now and forevermore.

The fire warriors, so close to breaking moments ago, rally around their leader and his bodyguard. One of these armoured knights falls to concentrated bolter

fire from my group, but the others shrug it off, the bolts ricocheting from the suits' angled planes, or exploding on the surface. The weapons they possess are far more effective against us than those carried by their infantry.

'Withdraw!' I shout. 'Fall back to the torpedo!'

'We have failed!' The cry comes from Roak. He is angry, and his anger is laced with shame.

'No. We are successful. There are ways to win other than slaughter.' This is true, I think. But if I depart now, then attention will fall upon the diplomat. Needs dictate a diversion, a sacrifice. There is no need for more than one more of us to die here.

A duty I accept unflinchingly. In this way do we serve the Emperor, and through him all mankind.

'Fall back. I will hold them here!' My brothers obey instantly. They cover each other as they retreat from the room. The xenos' armour makes them strong, but they are cautious in the face of such as we.

This is my oath; to serve the Emperor. We strike from the shadows where we can, and reap the glorious harvest of confusion and panic our actions engender. Not today. Not every war can be prosecuted in secret, not every battle won from the darkness. I stand firm, in full view, my bolter raised and shouting out mankind's superiority over the xenos that would usurp our position as masters of the stars. Now, revealed to my foe in full, I sing the quiet songs of my Chapter.

The xenos do not approach. They cannot draw adequate fire angles on me. I hold them.

I am gratified to witness the departure of my command. They communicate that they are aboard the torpedo, and tell me to join them. I would if I could. I adjudge the diversion sufficient, and that our final plan to be a success.

But I cannot fall back. I am surrounded. They are trying to come at me from behind while they pin me down to the front. From the gallery, increasing numbers of weapons are being brought to bear on me.

I cast a grenade at the lesser warriors advancing from my rear. My bolter is almost spent. I throw it down, pull free my axe and bolt pistol and charge at the battlesuited elite in the gallery space, hewing at them. Their armoured suits offer much protection, but against the energised edge of my axe, it avails them of little.

Before they take me, two die by my hand, and I am satisfied.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

We ran.

Through the ship, away from the noise of fighting, along a transverse corridor that connected the reception chamber to the kitchens and servants' quarters behind it. A tau in the livery of the earth caste diplomatic support group popped his face round the door and I snarled to him to get back into his cabin. There was a minimal number of earth caste servers aboard. A lucky happenstance, I thought at the time. They'd have been slaughtered.

Everything's calculated though, isn't it? My time with Skilltalker should have taught me that.

'We'll get him to the other side,' I said. 'We'll hold there until the threat is confined.'

'You lead. I'll take the rear,' Othelliar said. 'Give me another chance to take a crack at those whoresons.' He was really angry. He looked wild, all that blood on his face.

It was eerily silent here away from the fight. The Space Marines ship was no longer firing on us, not wanting to kill their own, I guess. We reached the other side of the vessel, and turned toward the rear.

'This way!' I said. I was panting. The air on tau ships is too thin. 'There's a strongpoint just down here. We can take station there and wait this mess out. I counted twenty Space Marines or so. That's a lot, but there's no way they can fight their way out of that.'

'Jathen, stop.' Othelliar said.

'Why?'

'Because we just ran past the lifeboat bay.'

'What's that got to...'

There was the building hum of a pulse gun, the whip-crack discharge. I whipped around to see Krix go down. Smoke poured out his thin chest. His beak

clacked once, and his eyes dulled. He was dead.

I stopped. Shock almost got me, but I had my gun up, pointing it without thinking at the kroot's assassin: Othelliar.

'Stand down, Jathen!' he said. All the anger had gone out of him. He was calm, and that made me very worried. 'This is where you're staying. Me and the por'el are going on alone from here.'

'What? Drop your gun now!' It took a moment for me to figure out what was going on. I was confused. There was no warning of Othelliar's treachery. One moment we were running away from the battle, intent on getting Skilltalker to safety, and now this?

And then it all clicked.

'This has been planned, all along. Skilltalker's the target. The attack is a diversion.'

'Almost, Jathen, I'm the back-up plan.' Blood was still trickling down his face. 'You always were a sharp one,' he said. 'Only this time, not sharp enough.'

Perhaps I should have shot him there and then. Maybe if he'd still been wearing his helmet, I would have. But I was looking into his face, wounded in a battle we'd fought together in. We were comrades, for the Emperor's sake. I just couldn't do it. I'd fought with him for nine months. All this time, he'd been waiting for his moment? It didn't make any sense. Othelliar? There was no triumph in what he said. I figured he wasn't acting of his own accord. He couldn't be.

'You're a plant?'

He nodded reluctantly.

'How long?'

'From the beginning. Does it matter? There are plenty of us. The Inquisition's been trying to infiltrate the gue'vesa since the last war. They kept me on stand-by. I guess they didn't want to reveal their trump card,' he swung his gun barrel away from me then, pointing at Skilltalker's head. 'I should kill you too, Jathen.'

'Why? You had us all convinced you hated the Imperium!'

'I still do. It was my poor luck my world got caught up in all this. We'd been minding our own business for the last ten millennia when the first crusade comes crashing into the sector. You know this part of space is alive with "lost" human worlds? I mean, I say lost, we know where we are. The Imperium'd know about more of them, if it gave a damn for this part of the galaxy. Some of them have never even heard of the Imperium. We had, and wanted no part of it.

Unfortunately for us, the Imperium didn't agree. At least I'm still alive, unlike just about everybody else I ever knew. Now, drop your gun or I swear I'll kill the por'el before I die.'

That did it. I'd have sold my own life for Skilltalker's, I think. In the great calculations of who was worth more alive you tau doubtless rated him much higher. But it was more than blind loyalty; I cared about him. He was the first damned friend I'd had in a long, long time.

I lowered my gun. He jabbed his carbine muzzle toward the lifeboat bay. I put my hands up and backed slowly toward it. The circular door spun and opened at my approach, and we entered the bay, a semicircular room with five lifeboat hatches at equal intervals around the wall.

'Why are you doing this?' I said. My throat was dry and my words caught.

Othelliar's face was red. His eyes were bright, with tears or fury I couldn't tell. The way he was glaring at me down the barrel... It was defiant, like he was challenging me to disagree with what he was doing, to call him to put his weapon down, to reach for my knife. Anything to make shooting me easier, because I saw then that he was relieved I'd obeyed him. He didn't have it in him to kill me either. He wiped the sweat from his face on the undersuit in the crook of his arm. The gun remained quiet. He answered me instead.

'They have my family.'

'Who?'

'The damned Inquisition!' he shouted back. 'Who do you think? Your thrice-damned Inquisition!'

I held up my hands. 'They're not my Inquisition.' They never had been, even back when I'd been one of the Emperor's loyal subjects. Who regards the Inquisition as on their side, for the love of Terra? 'I'm a member of the Tau'va. You are too. Don't do this, Othelliar. They'll cut him up alive to see what makes him tick. Can you do this to him? It's Skilltalker!'

Othelliar's eyes flicked from Skilltalker to me and back again.

'I have no choice. It's him or my children. My children, Jathen!'

'They'll never let you have them back. You know that.'

His eyes said he did know. I didn't blame him. In his situation would I have done any different? I ask myself that sometimes, usually at night when the screams come and the dreams grow dark and dawn is long hours away. The answer's always the same: Probably not.

'I don't have any choice,' he said.

He was right about that. People like him and me, we're all pawns on the board in the end.

'They're dead already, Othelliar.'

Othelliar stared at me. 'You know I can't let myself believe that.'

'I'm sorry.'

'I don't have any choice!' he screamed, and he pulled his weapon in tighter to

his shoulder. 'If I give up, if I go over, they'll kill my family, and they'll kill me. Deep cranial implant, so deep even these clever blueskins won't spot it. They get close enough to me, bang! That's it. Not that I care, but my children, Jathen...'

Skilltalker was his usual placid self. He held up calming hands. 'Do not fear, friend J'ten.' He spoke to Othelliar. 'Do not shoot J'ten Ko'lin. It will not advance your cause.'

'I don't want to kill him. They told me to leave no one alive, but I will. I'll only dance to their orders so long as they're watching. I'll leave him be if you come without trouble.'

'I have no intention of doing otherwise,' said Skilltalker.

'Good.' Othelliar kept us both covered. He was getting twitchier by the second. The sound of fighting away on the other side of the ship was getting loud enough to hear.

'He doesn't really want to do this,' I said. I was sure I could talk Othelliar out of it.

'No,' said Skilltalker. 'I will go with him, it is what must be. For your safety.' And then, Skilltalker took a step toward me.

'I thank you for the service. Truly you are gue'vesa, most faithful of companions. You have served the Tau'va in ways that you may never understand. You may recall I asked you once what form your ta'lissera would take?'

I nodded.

'Get away from him!' Othelliar barked. We ignored him.

'I hope you will think on it further. But, my friend, this shall be our ta'lissera.' He put out his hand. 'Is this custom an acceptable display of mutual friendship bonding?' It was as if Othelliar and his gun didn't matter any more. He might have shot Krix, but that was self-preservation, pure and simple, and Krix wasn't human. When it came down to staring another man in the eye and pulling the trigger, he was as keen as putting a carbine particle into one of his team members as I was, for all he said.

I reached out and took Skilltalker's hand. Dry skin, I remember, quite rough; feels thicker than human skin. I've not touched a tau many times. Strange that, thinking about it. We're more tactile than you.

He gripped my hand back, his three wide digits around mine. Then he reached out his other hand and wrapped it over the top of our clasp. 'This is my ta'lissera with you, Jathen, a binding that neither life nor death may sever,' he said. There was real warmth in it. 'I pledge my bond to you. I part ways from you as your friend. I thank you for your friendship. It has been most illuminating, but also...'

He said something in tau that I didn't quite understand and then smiled with that

flat space where your noses should be all wrinkled. ‘There is no word for it, not directly, in your language.’

Othelliar was getting more anxious, looking at the doors as if a horde of Space Marines were going to smash them down any moment. He gestured with his gun barrel, the weapon still held high to his shoulder.

‘Go, go!’ he shouted. He reached out and slapped Skilltaker, knocking his hat askew. This made me more angry than anything, and I would have gone for Othelliar there and then had Skilltaker not gestured for me to stand down.

Othelliar grabbed at Skilltaker’s robes, and yanked him backward from the room toward a lifeboat hatch. Its lock spun and the door hissed open.

Othelliar was treating Skilltaker more roughly than he needed. I felt for him, for what he was going through, but it wasn’t right the way he was acting.

Skilltaker made a gesture to me before the door slid shut, and this one I knew all too well – Tau’va.

For the Greater Good.

Only as the lifeboat’s engines firing shook the dock, did I realise that Skilltaker had used my human name.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Their alien technologies prove my undoing. Some device is clamped to my leg. I knock he who placed it there sprawling with the back of my hand, cracking the large shoulder pad he wears with the power of my blow. If only I held my axe in my right rather than my left hand, I would have slain him. I drop my bolt pistol, and reach down to rip the device free. It is circular, the size of a man's fist. Lights blink a rapid pattern and it emits a building whine. I lay my hand upon it too late. A massive burst of electromagnetic energy drives the spirit from my armour. My systems go dark. I feel sharp stabs of pain through the neural interfaces in my black carapace. The displays in my helmet fail. The world seems suddenly smaller, framed by only the lenses of my helmet. The sudden burden of my armour without its supportive musculature has me off balance. I stagger backward, dragged at by the power plant and cooling unit upon my back. Driven down by the dead weight of plasteel and ceramite that clads and protects me, I fall to my knees. I struggle to stand, but the remaining elite are by my side. It is no trouble for them to hold me in position, one hand each on my shoulders. I cannot rise.

Their leader comes before me, sinking to the ground on the white-hot jets of his flightpack. He lands lightly and they cut out.

'Well met, son of man,' he says. I raise my head. On my knees, he seems tall. If I were a lesser being, I would be intimidated. I am not, but I am taken aback by what occurs next.

The chest piece of the suit cracks open, swinging wide upon hinges to reveal the occupant within. Unlike our own battleplate, his limbs do not fill the limbs of his armour, but he sits in a space inside, piloting the armour rather than wearing it.

At this juncture, the reason for the suit's greater size becomes apparent. What gets out to stand over me is no tau, but a man.

‘I am Gue’vesa Dal’yth O’Va’Dem.’ Tall, noble of features, a sure and steady gaze. He wears dazzling white armour of form-fitting plates, a high gorget covering the lower portion of his face. Upon his forehead is branded the adorned I of the Emperor’s Inquisition.

‘I was once Inquisitor Lucien van Deem. You may use that name, if you wish. It is long since I spoke with an adept of the stars,’ he says. He is weighing my fate, this arch-traitor, but there is no hostility in his face. ‘I apologise for this conflict.’

‘And what would you have, if not conflict, when the enemies of mankind pit themselves against us and its very protectors turn persecutor?’ I say. My voice is muffled by my helmet. The traitor nods to the two battlesuited elites to either side of me. ‘Hold him,’ he says. The tau with him defer to his orders as if he were one of their own. He is every centimetre the alien commander, but his face is brown-skinned, not blue. The downward pressure from their hands increases. The rogue inquisitor reaches down to my helm. I jerk from side to side, but he grasps me hard, and with swift fingers depresses the hidden catches to release it. The seal hisses. I smell burning and scorched flesh at their fullest strength, and then he has drawn my helmet away from me and looks down at me with appraising eyes.

If I could move quickly enough, I would break his neck. I test the strength of my captors, and still cannot rise. If the Raven Guard still possessed the full suite of the Emperor’s gifts within its genestock, then I would spit poison in his face, but I have no Betcher’s Gland. Some of my brothers do, those raised from seed tithed to Terra by other Chapters. But I am of the purer sort, a greater proportion of Corax’s own genetic material is meshed into mine. For this singular honour, I pay the price in lessened ability. It is the only time I have ever regretted this lack.

The rogue’s gorget slips away into itself, and he looks at me, a traitor now fully unmasked. ‘What else? Cooperation, adept. Coexistence. Peace. Are these words so repugnant to a Raven Guard?’ He holds my helmet with respect. His hair is white, as is his beard. His eyes are a piercing green.

‘Treachery, deceit, dishonour. Are these words palatable to you?’ I reply. ‘They are anathema to me. You are anathema to me. What have they done to you, these creatures, to turn you from your sworn duty?’

He crouches before me, and sets my helmet aside. He knows the reverence with which we Space Marines treat our wargear. He respects it. ‘They have done nothing to turn me but talk to me. I was part of the Damocles Crusade, two hundred years ago. I was left behind upon their world which we so brutally ravaged. And for what reason? Reason did not come into it! The bitter pride of an old man – that was the reaction our Imperium gave to a race who bring

nothing but the promise of peace and salvation from the darkness. As they said to me, this is only what our own Emperor tried to achieve, so long ago, before the great treachery destroyed his dream on the cusp of its realisation. You are shocked. Oh, I see it even beneath the mask of hatred and contempt you wear. They know much of us. I swore to defend the Imperium of Man, from threats within and without. But what is the Imperium if not the guarantor of man's survival? The oaths I swore were to serve humanity, not the prison it has built around itself.'

'Those are not the oaths of the Imperium,' I retort.

'They are the spirit of the oaths. Or should be.'

'And so you throw your lot in with these naïve children.'

He snorts and smiles. 'The eldar say the same of us. We say that their empire is done and we are the inheritors of the stars. Not so. Our time is done also. We had our chance, and fell. The Emperor failed to restore us. I throw my lot in with a race which is young, vibrant, and just. A race that will tear back the veils of superstition and bring a new age of enlightenment to the galaxy, an age in which mankind can prosper as part of the Greater Good.'

'You seek to convert me. You will fail.'

He shakes his head and looks down. 'I do not seek to convert you, because I know I cannot. You cannot be taught the virtue of the Greater Good because you are not free. You are not a man, but a weapon, and there is no place within the new order for such as you. I am sorry.' He motions to his followers. They haul me to my feet. My armour is dead upon me, and I cannot act.

'You are a traitor.'

'If I am, then what I betray is worthy of betrayal. Take him away.'

And so I came here. Into this place. I am...

No.

I will not yield.

I am Brother-Sergeant Herek Cornix of the Raven Guard. I am Brother-Sergeant Herek Cornix of the Raven Guard. I am Brother-Sergeant Herek Cornix of the Raven Guard, and I will do my duty.

[Note, this was the last coherent thought pattern the nagi collectives were able to retrieve from the subject's mind. He went into arrest some moments later, the feedback from his suicide taking the remaining members of our weakened secondary collective to their deaths. Earth caste mental intensification equipment, operating at this point at an unprecedented 99%, was severely damaged. From this interrogation we can draw one conclusion, no more: the gue'ron'sha cannot be incorporated into the Tau'va. Where encountered, all

efforts must be expended to destroy them. This will serve the primary military goal of removing them as an immediate threat, but secondarily will also break gue'la morale, and demonstrate to them the self-evident superiority of the Tau'va. Report of Nagi'o Joauulliiallo, third level synaptic adjudicator of nagi collective 45978 ends.]

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

O'Va'Dem came to me not long after Skilltaker was taken. I guess I should have been surprised that he was a man like me, but I wasn't, not one bit. But I've never seen tau obey a non-tau like that before. Never.

He came to me in his underarmour. His face was troubled.

'I am sorry, O'Va'Dem. I have failed.' I hung my head. I felt sick, my stomach kept turning over and over, and my mind went unbidden to all manner of tortures that Skilltaker would soon be subjected to.

'Jathen Korling?' he said. I looked him in the eye. He must have been old, he had that look you get from good antigerontics, an ageless face sheltering old, old eyes.

'I am Lucien van Deem, in our shared language. Please, call me Lucien. We are all equals in the eyes of the Tau'va.' He had an accent to his Gothic. A tau accent.

'Lucien,' I said.

He smiled faintly in approval.

'I came to reassure you. You are not to blame.'

'How?' I said.

'Because the result of this entire deception was the kidnap and removal of Por'el Skilltaker into Imperial custody. You performed admirably, indeed, one might say a little too well – your dedication to your duty almost resulted in the failure of the mission. As it was, we thought Skilltaker would never be taken. After observing you – and I am a very good judge of men, Jathen – I feared you might suspect that Othelliar was an Imperial agent, however reluctantly.'

'But...' I said, not believing it. 'The attacks, the ambush... The Space Marines...'

'We had to make the task as hard as possible while making it achievable,' said van Deem, 'or our opponents on the other side would have suspected something.'

The Raven Guard in particular are masters at this sort of action, but I trust even they were convinced. A shame that the Inquisition is now almost certainly aware that we know of their sleeper agents. Even so, I expect that the misinformation Skilltalker will feed the Imperium will set back their war effort substantially.’ He sat beside me. I watched as earth caste medical staff carted a body sack containing Krix’s mortal remains past.

‘How can you be sure?’

‘He’s been extensively trained and his memories have been manipulated. To all intents and purposes, he believes what he will tell them, or at least he has convinced himself he does. If they find him out, well... We know about their plants within the Tau’va – like Othelliar – Skilltalker would just even the score.’ He stood. ‘There are many kinds of shadow war, not only the kind the likes of the Raven Guard prefer to fight. Skilltalker is a part of that war. He went gladly, of his own accord in service of a higher ideal.’

I remember the gesture he made at me as he stood in the lifeboat’s closing door.

‘Tau’va,’ I said glumly.

‘Tau’va,’ said the former inquisitor.

It was then that I noticed the tube built into the side of Lucien’s underarmour. I’ve seen them before. A nagi housing; you sometimes see them with the ethereals. Lucien had a mind worm with him, ensconced in its own subaquatic environment, safe from our poisonous air. He caught me staring at it, he smiled at me, not entirely reassuringly.

‘This? Do not be alarmed. This is Illluoosun, he is my advisor.’

‘He is carried with you gue’o,’ I said, feeling a queasy horror. ‘Is he interfaced directly?’ I was pushing my luck asking such a question.

‘Of course,’ he replied. ‘All the better to advise me,’ said the ex-inquisitor. ‘You have done well, and proven yourself. We need more humans like you, who take the Tau’va completely to heart. Until that happens, we will not be able to do our best for the greater good of all. I will make recommendations for you, in my report. Rest assured, they will be propitious. With the glowing praise Skilltalker lavished upon you, I think you have a bright future. Tau’va.’ With that, he walked out of the room, and out of my life.

‘Tau’va,’ I whispered back.

I like to believe that the worm was there as an advisor, that the aun had not put him under the creature’s control, that Lucien was his own master and served the Tau’va of his own accord.

If not, then I have to believe that it’s all for the Greater Good anyway.

What other choice do I have?

I still feel responsible, for Skilltalker, I mean; that it was my fault. I've been told again and again that it wasn't, but if I'd acted back on Mu'gulath Bay, then the whole scheme would never have come off, and he'd still be alive. I did what was expected of me, but was it the right thing? Was I good enough to be worthy of my own oaths? I wrestle with this still. I understand why I was used the way I was, but feeling and thinking... They're worlds apart from one another. I wonder, thinking back on that conversation on the Manta shortly before he was taken from us, if his wager with Por'ui Ka'shato was not actually a means to try and keep me out of all this. I don't know. What I do know is that Skilltalker was an example to us all. That's why, in part, I signed up for the vocal enhancement surgery.

After three tau'vyr waiting, I'm finally slated to have the surgery next week. The earth caste medics tell me it'll be two tau'vyr until I'll be able to speak, another one until I'm fit for duty, another five before I'll have mastered Tau'noh'por to a sufficient degree to fit in with the higher command ranks. Almost half a tau'cyr. But if it all works, then I'll be off back across the Damocles Gulf, leading the first frontline gue'vesa cadre from the new conquests to fight on behalf of the Tau'va. I don't care that it will be against those who were my brothers. I relish it. Nothing's perfect. The Imperium certainly is not. The commonwealth isn't either, but it is less cruel. If for no other reason than that a lesser evil is better than a greater one, I have pledged myself entirely to the cause. You are five castes, one people, but you are also now a dozen species, half a thousand cultures. In spite of this, there remains, for now, one goal.

I will do my utmost to ensure that that goal is fulfilled, for I have wholeheartedly made your goal my goal.

Tau'va.

Recording 7-9998-14 Gue'vesa. Institute of Human Affairs, Lui'sa'loa, Bork'an. Retrieval code 14a-159. Personal memoirs of Gue'vesa'vre Dal'yth J'ten Ko'lin, Gue'vesa auxiliary diplomatic protection la'rua 8448. ENDS

BLACK LEVIATHAN

Ben Counter

CHAPTER ONE

‘Where the enemy thinks himself strong, show him weakness. Where he thinks you weak, show strength. But beware all such perfidy, for every general may fall prey to believing his own lie.’

– Codex Astartes

‘We keep our secrets. Some of them, even from ourselves.’

The man who spoke had not removed the helmet of his power armour. His livery was jade and black with the stylised image of a dragon on one shoulder pad. Dense patterns of swirls and dots covered one greave and one forearm, giving the impression that they meant something that could only be deciphered with an understanding of their intricate code. In the dim light of the *Polar Defiance*’s map room, ebon eyepieces glittered in the faceplate.

‘So I understand,’ said Captain Devynius. ‘What little I have been told of your Chapter emphasises that above everything else. But the Ultramarines share their counsel with their allies and I expect you to do the same. Sergeant Seanoa, is that correct?’

‘It is,’ replied Seanoa.

‘Have you been briefed on our mission?’

‘The destruction of opposition to Imperial occupation in the city of Port Memnor,’ replied Seanoa bluntly.

‘That is one way of putting it,’ said Devynius. He tried to read some expression from the other Space Marine’s body language, but he found none. It was the custom among the Ultramarines to remove the helmet of one’s power armour when addressing another Space Marine away from the battlefield –

perhaps this Seanoa's Chapter did not share the same custom, or perhaps he was reminding Devynius that a Space Marine of one Chapter could not assume the subservience of another. He decided to give Seanoa the benefit of the doubt, for now. 'I would rather avoid destruction as much as possible. Port Memnor is an Imperial city and one which has been loyal to the Emperor's rule for thousands of years.'

'One that requires subjugation now the alien has its claws into it,' replied Seanoa. 'This ship has orbital bombardment capability. Not equal to the Exterminatus but more than enough for our purposes. You realise, do you not, that this mission could be completed in a matter of minutes, with the push of a button?'

'This mission, perhaps,' replied Devynius. 'But the occupation that follows will be ten times harder. The casualties among innocent civilians will set the population against us. The Imperial Guard would have to garrison the city in force if we were to use the spaceport, and that is manpower the war for Agrellan cannot afford to spare. We will do this my way, Sergeant Seanoa. The Ultramarines way, with honour and respect for the people whose Imperium we serve.'

'You are in command, Captain Devynius,' said Seanoa, and Devynius was sure both men understood how little that meant.

'We are three days out from Briseis,' said Devynius. 'I need full mission parameters drawn up by then. It is time you saw the prisoner.'

Both Agrellan and its near neighbour Briseis, as far as any could tell, were settled during the Scattering at the same time. That ancient migration of mankind across the stars, to every edge of the galaxy, had placed on Agrellan and Briseis colonies of humans that could not support themselves on an alien world. Both colonies had collapsed and reverted to the savagery that now prevailed on countless such worlds across the Imperium.

Agrellan had rebuilt its society and come to prosper. In the age of the Imperium it was a hive-world, a vast population supported by many-layered cities devoted to industry, the tracts between the cities drained of resources so the planet had to be fed by nearby agri worlds. Briseis had stayed barbaric until thousands of years after Agrellan's urbanisation and only comparatively recently, over the last two or three thousand years, had the Imperially-founded city of Port Memnor become the capital of the planet's population and society.

Then the Damocles Gulf war had come, the second conflict over that reach of space between the Imperium and the xenos. And Agrellan had found itself the front line.

‘Open the shutters,’ came a voice piped in over the vox-casters. Two crewmen cranked the handle that raised the shutters covering the viewing windows, revealing the inside of the cell. The brig on the *Polar Defiance* resembled a dungeon of sweating steel, cold and functional, its locks and doorways hand-operated and mechanical to keep the place secure in case the power failed. Even the light came from torches burning in sconces on the walls.

Inside the cell was a single figure crouched on the floor, its long limbs folded up around it. The bed and ablutions vessel were the only furniture in there with it. Even before its face became fully visible, its proportions were clearly inhuman.

‘I faced the greenskins a dozen times,’ said Devynius’s fellow Ultramarine, Brother-Sergeant Thaxos. ‘Tyranids, too. Huge bloody monsters that would tear your face off without knowing you were there. This thing doesn’t look like much of an enemy.’

Thaxos wore the white trim of a veteran on his blue power armour, his dark and battered skin broken by the studs of silver implanted on his forehead to denote the length of service he had given as a sergeant of the Ultramarines. Devynius was well aware that Thaxos was older than he, and yet Devynius was of the higher rank. Thaxos served as much as an advisor to Devynius as the sergeant of his command squad. When Devynius had been told that he would have only one squad of Ultramarines with which to prosecute this mission, he had chosen Squad Thaxos.

‘An enemy need not hold a gun to threaten us,’ said Devynius. ‘More than most, this one’s weapon is cunning and lies.’

‘Our only weapon,’ replied the alien, ‘is the truth.’

Its voice was dry and sibilant, like the shifting of sand. It unfolded its long arms and legs and stood. It had been given a crewman’s blue jumpsuit to wear, the arms and legs of the jumpsuit barely reaching its knees and elbows but hanging baggily around its narrow shoulders and chest. Its face was far too long compared to that of a human, with an elongated hairless cranium, two huge pure black eyes, and a thin, wide mouth. It had no nose, instead breathing through a slit that ran from the middle of its forehead to level with the lower edge of its eyes. Its skin was blue-grey, though in the cell it had become paler and duller.

‘First one I’ve seen in the flesh,’ said Thaxos. ‘Not sure what the fuss is all about.’

The alien put a hand against the toughened glass wall of the cell. It leaned forward, peering at Thaxos as if he was the prisoner and the alien was the interrogator. ‘The first step is to think upon what you are,’ it said. ‘And what you are permitted to be. When you comprehend the gulf between them, then you will

turn to the Greater Good.'

'It can't stop,' said Devynius, looking back at the alien. 'Even when it is in chains.'

'I speak only what you know is true,' the alien replied.

Thaxos drew his combat blade. Its monomolecular edge flickered in the torchlight. 'Would you like to hear my reply?' he said.

A shutter on the wall behind Devynius rattled open, revealing Sergeant Seanoa. Two of his squad were with him and their armour showed the same tangles of symbolic designs, though less intricate than the sergeant's.

'A living tau,' said Devynius, indicating the alien. 'Not so rare in itself, but this one is of their diplomatic caste. The water caste, they call them. These are not so commonly taken alive.'

'Where did you get it?' asked Seanoa. Even with his face hidden beneath his helmet, his disdain was clear – no, thought Devynius, not disdain, not the contempt a Space Marine should feel for the xenos. It was a detachedness, like that of a scientist examining something on a slide or performing experiments on something he had long since stopped thinking of as a living creature.

'Inquisitorial agents brought it out of the Chrono-Wright's District of Port Memnor,' replied Devynius. 'It's a tau emissary, primed to create sedition and defection among Imperial citizens. Its Low Gothic is perfect. It has knowledge of Imperial history and institutions, too. They have been watching us, these xenos.'

'What has it told us?'

'All about the Greater Good,' said Devynius. 'And about how a Space Marine can become all that his Emperor intended him as a part of the Tau Empire.'

'It does know what we are?' said Seanoa.

'If they don't know now, they soon will,' said Brother Thaxos. 'The Raven Guard and the White Scars are fighting them across Agrellan. They'll have to learn a whole lot more about the Space Marines if they want to take one of the Emperor's worlds from us.'

'We will not take anything,' said the alien, which had not flinched even to be confronted by five Space Marines. 'Agrellan will join us as surely as the day comes to join the dawn. Its people will decide your battle, not your soldiers or ours, and they will choose the Greater Good.'

'What is this Greater Good?' asked Seanoa.

'Whatever benefits the tau,' said Devynius.

'Thus do small minds speak of it,' interjected the alien. 'When they do not have the strength to understand.'

'The corruption you have brought to Agrellan means millions of people will

die,' retorted Devynius. 'That does no good for anyone.'

'Would that the Greater Good could exist without conflict, and that all would walk into its embrace without resistance,' said the tau, its voice almost hypnotically level. 'But it is a good greater than the lives of those who must be lost to see it become reality. It is worth the bloodshed. It is worth anything, for it is to the betterment of all.'

'Their fire caste warriors are on Agrellan fighting for its hive cities,' said Devynius, 'but on Briseis, this is the enemy. Words and lies. Already Port Memnor has been compromised and there is no way we can guarantee its safety for Imperial use if we do not weed out the xenophile faction first. That is the mission for which we have been chosen. We are stretched too thin to take Port Memnor and the spaceport by main force so we must do it with guile and swiftness instead, with our two squads and a devotion to honour and victory. That is why I have shown you this alien, Sergeant Seanoa. This is our enemy, not the people of Briseis.'

Seanoa regarded the xenos for a moment longer. The alien finally fell silent and backed down when confronted with Seanoa's eyepieces, as if it could see through to the pitiless face underneath.

'What will you do with it?' Seanoa said at length.

'Keep it,' said Devynius. 'As long as it is useful.'

'When it learns what befell its brothers on Briseis,' said Seanoa, 'it will envy them that the end came so quickly.'

At an invisible signal, Seanoa's two squadmates marched out of the brig, the shutter clattering down behind them. Devynius pressed a control stud on the wall and the shutters fell down over the cell walls, too, and the alien was hidden from view again.

'Jade Dragons,' said Thaxos, an impressed note in his voice. 'I never thought I'd see them in the flesh, either.'

The defence laser batteries surrounding the spaceport of Port Memnor could not be trusted. They were ostensibly still in the hands of the Imperial government of Briseis, but every strata of the city's society had been compromised by the tau water caste emissaries and it was too great a risk to bring a spacecraft within reach of them. If the *Polar Defiance* attempted to make low orbit to drop transports that could land at the spaceport, xenophiles hidden among the gun crews could shoot the transports down and have a good chance of bringing the cruiser itself down after them. Devynius therefore took his small force of Space Marines down to the surface of Briseis by shuttle, landing beyond the city's outskirts – a cumbersome way of making landfall without the swiftness and

shock the Space Marines normally made use of, but better than having the mission end before it began in a rain of burning wreckage.

The four shuttles made landfall in a forest of cairns, tumbledown dry-stone structures where ancient chieftains and kings were buried. It was a sacred place, a shallow bowl in the landscape formed by the low shale-covered hills surrounding it and the course of a long-dried river that had left its chemical stains on the rocky ground. Iridescent blue and green riddled the ground like alien blood trails, weaving around cairns and low tombs of shale slabs. The few plants that found purchase there shuddered in the downwash of the shuttles' retro engines, flinty shards scattered by the impact as they touched down.

Each shuttle disgorged five Space Marines, spread out among the craft to minimise the crash risk. The jade and black armour of Seanoa's squad stood out against the stony slopes. The Ultramarines gathered around Devynius as he jumped from the gunmetal shuttle and set foot on the planet Briseis for the first time.

'Cheerful place,' said Brother Thaxos as he jumped down behind Devynius. 'Lovely view.'

'A place the people of Briseis made their home for tens of thousands of years,' replied Devynius. 'They were nomads before the Imperium founded Port Memnor. They followed the seasons and came by here once a year, to bury their dead.'

'You are quite the historian, captain.'

'I read my intelligence, Thaxos,' replied Devynius.

'I'm amazed the sky didn't drive them mad first,' said Thaxos, looking upwards.

Briseis had a breathable atmosphere, but it clung to the world in a thin and precarious layer. Light from the system's star did not have to pass through the many layers of gas and dust of a deeper atmosphere and as a result the sky was permanently the black of the void, scattered with stars and including the hot bright diamond of the Dovar System's sun. Agrellan itself hung among the stars, the blue-green of polluted oceans blooming out from continents as grey as ash or brown as dirt, blistered with the radiating black tendrils of the planet's hive cities.

On the horizon, past the slate hills sharp as knives, rose the spires of Port Memnor. The generatorium exhaust towers spewed grey smoke, between them the wider squat coolant towers rippling heat haze up past the stars. Hab-towers and communication masts were dark grey against the black. Somewhere below that skyline was a nest of xenophiles, heretics who had forsaken the Imperium of Man in favour of easy answers promised by an alien. Devynius's duty was to

root them out, and the demand of his honour as an Ultramarine was to do so with a minimum of violence to the innocent and loyal who made up the majority of the city's population.

Devynius took out the auspex scanner and activated its screen, displaying the many maps of the city that Imperial intelligence had provided. He selected one of the outskirts, a tangle of sewers and processing plants that siphoned off the by-products of Port Memnor's industries.

'Seanoa!' voxed Devynius, and the Jade Dragons sergeant approached. 'I will take my men to the entry point immediately. I suggest you enter the city by the south-west gate and make your way to the southern transportation hub. From there you can get to most areas of the city quickly.'

'I would take the fight to the xenophiles,' said Seanoa. 'It is not the way of my Chapter to wait in reserve for the enemy to make his move.'

'This operation will be conducted my way,' replied Devynius, the tone of his voice aimed at cutting off any argument. 'You have your orders, sergeant.'

Seanoa did not reply but turned back to his men and, with a gesture, set them off on the quick march towards scree-sloped hills and the port city beyond.

'I don't like him,' said Thaxos over the Ultramarines squad vox, watching the Jade Dragons blend in and almost vanish among the rocks of Briseis's wilderness.

'Do you like anyone?' asked Devynius.

'There are some I tolerate,' said Thaxos.

The Ultramarines were already moving, heading for a cleft in the hills. The trickle of a foul effluent river glittered there, a mix of industrial chemicals. The river's source was the processing district of the city, where the Ultramarines would enter Port Memnor.

'In through the bloody sewers,' said Brother Merovos, who carried the squad's plasma gun in its sling at his side.

'That's what you get for being the saviours of mankind,' said Thaxos cheerfully. 'You have to cover yourself in ordure before you can cover yourself in glory.'

'Conduct yourselves like Space Marines,' voxed Devynius sharply, and the squad moved off towards the city.

CHAPTER TWO

'There is no enemy so mighty in body that he cannot be defeated by the addling of his mind.'

– Codex Astartes

Down among the lowest levels of the Chrono-Wrights' District, among the foundation piles of the workshops and hab-blocks, were the tombs. The Imperial founders had built Port Memnor on the site of one of Briseis's only permanent settlements, a necropolis whose inhabitants were a cursed and unclean tribe who made their homes among burial places of past kings. The tombs here had not been used for millennia, and in the unclean pits of bone and crumbling slate the meeting occurred by guttering torchlight.

The humans wore industrial rebreathers, the same kind that kept the worst of the metallic pollutants out of their lungs as they laboured in the workshops. Half a dozen of them guarded the elder, a bent and greying woman who seemed weighed down by the mask around her mouth. She walked with a staff that might have been a badge of office or might have been a simple necessity given the unsteadiness of her step as the guards led her across the uneven ground. The robes of her station, the deep green of the Thundercliff tribe, were mostly hidden beneath protective coveralls. Only the braids in her hair and the black ash markings on her face were obvious indicators of her exalted status among the old tribes of Briseis.

The aliens were waiting. Like the elder, the emissary had come here guarded, a trio of fire caste warriors standing alongside him. Their faces were hidden in their featureless helmets, painted a dark orange-brown to go with the desert

fatigues they wore. Each was armed with a rifle of alien design, shaped like nothing that had ever come from an Imperial weaponsmith. The emissary was taller and more spindly than his guards, for his caste did not do the ugly, base work of fighting. His own vestments were orange and black, shimmering and lustrous, and he jangled with the lengths of segmented metals forming a code to describe his rank and deeds.

‘To look upon you,’ said the elder of the Thundercliff, ‘I wonder not why the Imperium fears you so.’

‘It is natural for humans to recoil from the sight of the alien,’ replied the emissary. His Low Gothic was perfect, even weaving in the dialect and accent of Briseis’s old tribes. ‘The small-minded allow such things to rule their thoughts, but the wise examine them and rise above them.’

‘I do not recoil,’ said the elder. ‘The Thundercliff have seen worse.’

‘I am glad to hear it,’ said the emissary. ‘I have requested your presence here because we have detected Imperial forces landing near the city. The resistance against the Imperium must be stepped up. Fortunately we have foreseen this and with your assistance, the Imperial yoke shall be cast off and the independence of Briseis assured.’

‘That reminds me,’ said the elder. She clapped her hands and one of the tribesmen stepped forwards, handing the tau emissary a bundle wrapped in stained cloth. The emissary nodded a bow in appreciation and unwrapped the bundle.

If he was surprised to see a battered human head in his hand, he did not show it. The skin was pale grey, the hair matted black with blood, and from the smell of it putrefaction had been going on for a few days.

‘The information about the Imperial spies in the city came from this man,’ the elder said. ‘Such knowledge being drained from him, he was executed. I trust you are not so different from us that you do not exalt in the severed heads of your enemies?’

‘Quite so,’ said the emissary, handing the head to one of his guards. ‘The Imperium’s agents may believe they have infiltrated us, but they know nothing of the true scale of our resistance. They know no more of our plans than it suits us to tell them.’

‘There was a time,’ said the elder, ‘when a spy among us would have been cast off the cliffs into the beast pits. He would have been devoured from the feet up, and begged us to kill him. We would have stared down at him as he died, and drunk deep of the anguish on his face as we gave him only silence. Now, we just cut off his head. We have become soft. I would go back to those days, emissary.’

‘You will,’ said the alien. ‘I promise you that. For the Greater Good.’

‘For our good,’ replied the elder.

‘The enemy will be at our gates in a matter of hours,’ said the emissary, his tone unchanged despite the challenge. ‘We will contact you with what must be done. You will need this.’ One of the fire caste warriors stepped forward holding a roll of hide. The emissary took it from him and let a length of it unravel to the tomb floor. It was gnarled and scaly, scarred all over as if by massive claws and pocked with clusters of barnacles. It smelled of the deep sea and rot.

‘What is this?’ asked the elder, not hiding the distaste on her face.

‘A standard,’ said the emissary. ‘Of great power and import. I ask that you trust us, as you have so graciously thus far, when we instruct you as to its use.’

The tribesmen took the banner between them – it was too heavy for one man to carry. Trickle of stinking water splattered onto the floor of the tombs.

‘You instruct us often,’ said the elder. ‘You do not call them orders, but we are no fools. The Imperium is a common enemy to us, but you are still an alien and this is still our world. Take care not to forget that, or our greater good may prove not to coincide with your own.’

‘Our people are philosophers,’ said the emissary. ‘We have dedicated the life of our species to understanding what truly is good in life, and how best to spread that truth to those deserving of it. You deserve the Greater Good, people of Briseis. Trust us.’

The elder did not reply. She gestured to her guards and left with the banner, leaving the emissary and his fire caste warriors in the darkness beneath Port Memnor.

The operation did not have an auspicious start, for it began down among the filth of Port Memnor, the industrial run-off from a thousand workshops and the city’s enormous generatorium. Through the brown-black slurry the Ultramarines forged, the deep blue of their armour stained with abrasive chemicals, the rebreathers built into their helmets keeping their lungs intact against the corrosive fumes. Captain Devynius’s helmet was topped with a transverse crest to mark him out in the chaos of battle – it dragged along the top of the sewer and was now a clotted black nest of rat’s tails. At least he had not worn the cloak which bore the markings of his rank and achievements.

‘It’s right above us,’ voxed Brother Silen, taking point and reading the squad’s location from his auspex scanner. Devynius checked the maps loaded onto his own auspex and saw Silen was correct.

‘Merovos!’ ordered Devynius. ‘Knock on the door!’

Brother Merovos hauled his plasma gun up out of the sludge. Its power coils warmed up and acidic vapour rose off the weapon as he aimed it at the ceiling of

the tunnel, a seam between two long sections. The rest of the squad backed off as the power coils whined, warming up to full power.

The gun filled the sewer with the glare of its plasma bolt, and the upper section of the sewer vanished. A cloud of vaporised steel rushed down the sewer in both directions, and Devynius was forced back a step by the sudden burst of pressure.

‘Go!’ voxed Devynius. ‘Onward!’

Brother Silen was the first out, hauling himself up through the hole. At that point in the sewer the pipe came within a few centimetres of the floor above, forming a hidden breaching point. It wasn’t hidden any more, as Silen burst up with bolter in hand.

‘Citizens!’ yelled Silen, ‘Do not resist! We are the Emperor’s hand! We are the Angels of Death!’

It took a few seconds for the screaming to begin. In that time half the squad had made it through the breach, Devynius vaulting up onto the floor.

Through the roil of scalding vapour, the columns of the parliament building soared up to a vault painted with vengeful angels and celestial choirs. The throne of the Emperor, depicted as a great gilded chair with the occupant obscured by a glare of light, formed a centrepiece of a grand central panel.

Below, the marble-tiled floor was scattered with knots of dignitaries in the lavish garb of Briseis’s ruling class. The city’s industry was precision mechanics and the wealthy and powerful wore constructions of clockwork – tall periwigs adorned with automata of battling knights or ships at sea, mantles which placed cherubs with flapping wings on the wearer’s shoulder, spinning cogs and pistoning gears everywhere. The men and women looked with shock at the Ultramarines emerging from the evil-smelling cloud of industrial chemicals. Some of them were screaming at the sight of them.

The Angels of Death. The vengeful fist of the Emperor, the defenders of humanity and the scourge of the unrighteous. Every Imperial citizen knew of the Space Marines, the icon of Imperial might, of the divine right of humanity to rule the stars and the vengeance that would fall upon every heretic and alien. And now they were here, in Briseis’s parliament building, and terror struck everyone who saw them.

The shock of the first few seconds died down, and they ran. Devynius saw aged matriarchs, young rakes and grey-templed noblemen sprinting at the sight of the Ultramarines, scattering wigs and swagger-sticks in their wake.

‘No resistance,’ voxed Devynius. ‘Make all speed, brothers. To the council chamber!’

Briseis fell under the auspices of Agrellan’s Lord Governor but Port Memnor

had its own government, an aristocratic oligarchy based on the world's most powerful families and representatives from its old tribes. That aristocracy, all the intelligence suggested, had been infiltrated first. They had to be taken down.

Grand stairs swept towards the upper floor, where a dozen entrances led to the upper galleries of the council chamber. Devynius ran his squad up them, bolters held ready.

Dignitaries were running everywhere, tumbling down the steps and falling over one another to get out of the way. Devynius ignored them. An Ultramarine held his focus, even when hell was breaking out around him.

The doors at the top of the stairway were closed. The assault's timing had worked out – the Ultramarines had caught the council in session. The doorway opposite was formed by the wings of a great carved wooden eagle, its harsh jet eyes glaring down at anyone who dared approach the city's seat of government.

Devynius ran to the doors and kicked one off its hinges, the wood splintering and the carved eagle's head collapsing to the floor behind him.

More than five hundred nobles and plutocrats made up Port Memnor's government council. Most of them were there for that session in the grand circular chamber, with its speaker's throne on one side and the councilmen's benches radiating out from the heap of sacred books and scrolls in the centre. Almost half that number again were made up by functionaries, manservants, observers and recorders in the galleries. All turned to look as the doors ripped inwards and Devynius stomped into the chamber.

'Councilmen of Briseis,' shouted Devynius. 'The infiltration of the xenos and his lackey into your ranks has rendered you unfit to rule. You are relieved of government and are henceforth the Emperor's to do with as He wills. The innocent have nothing to fear and the guilty will be rooted out. Until then, you are under arrest. Place yourselves...'

One of the councillors jumped to his feet. He was younger than most, handsome and dashing, the image of an Imperial nobleman. He wore the uniform of his family's household guard, heavy with gilt, and the Port Memnor fashion for decorative clockwork saw the campaign medals and honorifics on his chest dazzle as they spun.

'As the emissaries said,' he cried out, 'they have come to kill us! Fight back, sons of Briseis! To arms! Here it begins!'

He ripped up the seat of the bench on which he had been sitting and took from it a rifle – not a las-weapon, standard armament of the Imperial Guard, nor a nobleman's hunting rifle. Its long barrel was rectangular in cross-section, painted in the dark ochres of desert camouflage, and in the nobleman's hands it looked awkward and uncomfortable as if it hadn't been made for human dimensions.

The rest of the squad were charging in behind Devynius as the nobleman levelled the rifle at the Ultramarines captain.

Devynius dropped to one knee and rolled as the weapon fired. A bolt of blue energy speared through the wall behind him, shearing off some of the wooden feathers that remained of the carved eagle.

More of the councillors were breaking out weapons, many of them the long alien rifles, others shorter-barrelled guns that fired rapid bursts of blue-white energy. The dense wood of the benches and partitions were shredded even as the Ultramarines ducked down for cover.

People were dying already. Nobles and functionaries caught in the crossfire had huge holes punched through them, flesh cauterised and bone turned to ash as the energy bolts discharged and ripped them apart. The council chamber rang with screaming and the high shriek of the alien gunfire. Men and women were clambering over one another and being trampled underfoot as most made for the exits. Those who stood and fought were rallying to the first noble's command, leaping into firing position and crying slogans of freedom and defiance.

'Thaxos, take the throne!' ordered Devynius as another burst of gunfire streaked over his head. 'Fire-team, to me!'

Devynius's squad operated as one in most circumstances but when required it split into two fire-teams, one led by Devynius and the other by the veteran Thaxos. Brother Merovos, part of Devynius's team, slid into cover beside the captain as Thaxos broke cover and sprinted from one bank of wooden seating to the next.

Devynius heard Brother Silen yell and the Ultramarine fell to the floor beside him a moment later, clutching one arm to his chest. 'Got my shoulder,' gasped Silen. 'Damn thing went through my armour. Alien tech. Xenophile filth.'

Devynius, Silen and Merovos were joined by Timesus and Vesuvio. The faceplate of Vesuvio's helmet was scored through and glowing from a glancing hit – he tore the helmet from his head and cast it aside, revealing a crimson strip of burned skin across his face. 'Too close, by Calth,' he spat. 'Too close for these gun-whelps to get.'

'Return fire!' ordered Devynius. He levelled his own bolt pistol over the cover and snapped off a handful of shots at the enemy – well over fifty enemies faced him across the chamber, rapidly forming up behind cover to lay down withering fire at the Space Marines. A knot of them, led by the uniformed noble, had set up by the heaps of books and scrolls at the centre of the room. The burning pages of Briseis's ancient law-tomes fluttered down around them, ignited by the bursts of energy fire.

Devynius caught the uniformed noble in the upper chest, the bolt pistol's shell

blasting one arm and shoulder away, leaving the head tottering on a shattered spine. The body flopped out of view. Vesuvio stood proud of cover and rattled off a thundering volley of bolter fire, blasting the cover of the books away and throwing another corpse against the front row of benches, blown almost clean in half through the abdomen.

The back of the bench in front of Devynius was coming apart, the wood splintering and charred from the energy fire. ‘Those are pulse rifles,’ he voxed. ‘They’ll go right through our cover. Close, brothers, close and kill!’

Merovos stood and sprayed a fusillade of bolts from his plasma gun, the power coils flaring as the fist-sized bolts of liquid power splattered across the hall. The heretics dived for cover as the fire rained down around them and Devynius led the charge into the break in return fire. He vaulted the bench and crunched through the burning wreckage around him, kicking through the furnishings until he reached the table of burning books. His fire-team were right behind him, firing as they ran.

Devynius drew his power sword from its scabbard at his waist. The enemy had the firepower – the pulse rifles were xenos weapons, tau weapons, and they used technology of a level the Imperium could not replicate. But the enemy were still just men, and as far as Devynius knew the tau had not yet developed any weapon the equal of an angry Space Marine fought face-to-face.

Devynius heard a high whine over the gunfire, the sound of something very powerful warming up. He glanced over the burning books and saw one of the nobles, a woman, throwing off the bulky hoop-skirted dress she wore to reveal off-white armour plates banded around her body. The elaborate clockwork automata perched on her shoulders had concealed twin pulse weapons mounted on the back of her armoured bodysuit, and they tracked to follow her eyes as she tried to pick out a target among the flames and bedlam of the chamber.

Devynius had gone through the intelligence the Inquisition’s spies had submitted about Port Memnor’s parliament. Several of the councillors were considered particularly influential among the populace, and one of them was the woman that Devynius now saw clad in tau-made combat armour firing volleys of pulse fire at his battle-brothers. He recognised the sharp, hard features and ice blue eyes of Lady Solheindal-Thess, representative of one of the city’s oldest and most respected families. The intel had made it very clear that she was a devout Imperial loyalist, and that she was one of the councillors whose survival was important to provide the city with loyal leaders during Imperial occupation.

The supposed loyalist blasted another volley at Brother Timesus, who rolled to the ground before the chain of fire took his head off.

Devynius leapt up onto the table, scattering burning books. Lady Solheindal-

Thess was a couple of strides away and she turned her icy eyes towards Devynius as he broke cover. Twin scouring blasts of flame shot down from thruster units mounted over her shoulder blades and cast her into the air, firing a burning arc down at Devynius as she soared over him.

Devynius did not run. He trusted in his armour, artificer-crafted plate from the forges of Ultramar, to deflect the first couple of shots that thudded against his shoulder guard. He leapt at Lady Solheindal-Thess as she came down to land, letting his bolt pistol fall from his hand and clamp by its mag-lock to his forearm. He grabbed the xenophile's ankle and dragged her down, slamming her into the floor.

The xenophile's armour covered everything except her head in flexible plating, with the joints enhanced with pistons and servos to lend her greater strength and freedom of movement. The forearm armour reformed into a thin glowing blade that extended from the back of her hand.

'Heretic!' growled Devynius, grasping at the noblewoman's bladed wrist.

'This is no heresy,' replied Lady Solheindal-Thess. 'This is the future. We will bring you down.'

The blade lanced at Devynius's face. Devynius grabbed her wrist and bent it back – it should have snapped in Devynius's fist but the alien armour's joints were reinforced and powered, and the noblewoman span underneath him and suddenly a second blade, extended from her other forearm, was cutting at his throat.

Devynius ducked back before his throat was slit. The blade sliced off a chunk of his shoulder guard. He brought his power sword down overhead, arcing down at the noblewoman. The jets on the back of her armour fired and threw herself over Devynius's head again, her wrist still in his grip, as the sword came down and carved a deep furrow in the wooden floor.

The noblewoman's twin guns fired. Devynius let the armour of his shoulder guard and breastplate absorb two shots, and he pulled her in. The jets fought against him but Devynius put a foot against the frame of the burning book table and hauled her towards him.

Panic flared on her face. The defiance melted even as Devynius brought the power sword around at her. The twin pulse carbines swivelled to aim at Devynius's face, just a thought needed to fire another point-blank burst into Devynius.

The sword sliced through Lady Solheindal-Thess at waist height. It passed straight through her, the power field carving through the armour plates around her abdomen and lower back. Devynius slammed the upper half of her into the table, crunching through the wood. She disappeared in a flood of burning pages.

Devynius dropped to one knee and took stock of the battle. Dozens were dead, draped over the councilmen's benches or in heaps of burning finery on the floor. Some of them clutched the tau pulse rifles; others had simply been caught in the crossfire, blasted apart by bolter shells or pulse rounds.

Twenty or thirty of the xenophiles had formed an organised firebase, sniping at Devynius's fire-team from behind the casings of a choir of notary servitors. The servitors' casings were packed with enough clockwork to absorb the worst of the fire and the few whose pasty torsos had yet to be damaged continued to clack away with quill-tipped fingers, blank dead faces staring impassively across the corpse-choked chamber.

Brother Thaxos's fire-team appeared among the sculptures of the throne, where the council's speaker oversaw debates. It was of massive carved hardwood, the core of a gigantic single tree, solid enough to turn away the pulse rifle shots that spattered against it. Thaxos led his battle-brothers in hammering a wave of bolter fire into the servitors, throwing the xenophiles into cover and blasting ragged wet holes in those caught in the open.

The pulse fire coming towards Devynius died down. He strode through the remains of the burning table, dropping the severed lower half of Lady Solheindal-Thess. His own fire-team followed him as he flicked his bolt pistol back into his hand and lent his own fire to Thaxos's, blasting the arm off a xenophile at the elbow as the man leaned out to snipe at the advancing Ultramarines. Brother Merovos vaporised a servitor with a blast of plasma and the xenophile behind it stumbled, burning, the rifle dropping from his hands.

In moments, Devynius's fire-team were among them. Devynius had spent thousands of hours in the duelling circles and drilling-halls of the Ultramarines fortress-monastery on Macragge, and the muscle memory kicked in as he lashed out with his power sword. Thaxos's fire-team ceased fire as Devynius struck off a head here, an arm there, impaled another heretic in the blade's point and shot another through the chest with his bolt pistol. Brother Silen cracked a skull with the butt of his bolter and Devynius spotted Brother Timesus putting a shot through the head of a heretic struggling on the floor – Timesus's arm hung loose at his side, blood turning the blue of his armour black.

It was over. The xenophiles were dead. Those who had tried to flee as Devynius charged had been shot down by Thaxos, who wore a generous handful of marksman's honours hanging from the lower edge of his right pauldron and was known throughout the Chapter as an outstanding shot. Devynius waved his squad into a perimeter formation and walked through the debris towards the heap of burning books.

He pushed Lady Solheindal-Thess's body out of the fire. Her face was largely

untouched but the alien armour plates were blackened by the flames. Her eyes were open, a trickle of blood running from her mouth.

‘Thought she was one of ours,’ said Thaxos. ‘She was on the list, wasn’t she?’

‘She was,’ said Devynius.

‘What is this she was wearing?’

‘Tau battlesuit technology,’ said Devynius. ‘They turn up among xenophile nobles from time to time. Symbols of rebellion and prestige. I doubt she bought it for hard cash, though. The tau bought her loyalty with their trinkets.’

‘Captain,’ said a trembling voice from nearby. ‘It is captain, isn’t it?’

Devynius saw a young nobleman picking himself up from one of the bullet-riddled benches. His face was bloody and he had torn away the jacket of his dark blue uniform. Tatters of silver brocade hung from his shoulder. He had the look of one who had trained for hunting and war but did not make it his vocation, too slight and pale to be a soldier.

‘Devynius of the Ultramarines. You are?’

The nobleman was forcing himself not to look at the body of Lady Solheindal-Thess at Devynius’s feet. ‘Baron Maelenar,’ said the young man. ‘Of House Maelenar.’

Devynius consulted the screen of his auspex scanner, cycling through the intelligence reports on Briseis. House Maelenar-Kolgor was considered loyal, with a reasonable level of confidence. The baron had ascended to his rank after the recent death of his great-uncle, the house patriarch. There were no other notes on the young man. ‘Then House Maelenar is the first to stake its claim,’ said Devynius.

‘There will be great uncertainty,’ said Baron Maelenar, carefully picking his words. ‘The city will need leadership.’

‘That didn’t take long,’ said Thaxos. ‘And I take it his lordship is the one to provide it?’

‘My family is old,’ said the baron. ‘We have connections, and our loyalty is certain.’

‘That is what they said,’ replied Devynius, indicating the body of Lady Solheindal-Thess, ‘about her.’

‘And I am more aware than anyone of the consequences of disloyalty,’ said the baron.

Devynius looked at this man, who had just seen family and friends shot down before his eyes, who had narrowly avoided joining them in the crossfire, and yet who even now was politicking his way towards supremacy for his house. It was not an attitude that endeared a man to a son of Ultramar like Devynius, but it also suggested someone who put political pragmatism above everything else and

would do whatever he was told if it meant House Maelenar took power in Port Memnor and kept it. As unpleasant as the idea was, Baron Maelenar might be just the sort of man the Imperium needed.

‘You are the speaker of the council,’ said Devynius. ‘The Imperial war effort will make demands of you. Can you fulfil them?’

‘There are precedents,’ replied the baron. His colour was coming back and his voice was steadier – politicking was a world he was comfortable in, and engaging in it let him banish the events from a few minutes ago. ‘Emergency decrees. There is one that gives the speaker the power to select council members. It does not specify a number, so long as decisions are quorate. It was created in case the city was infected and carriers of an infectious disease had to be kept out of the chamber but I can enact it now and put loyal men into the council. There will be no legal hindrance to the demands of the Imperium.’

‘Do it,’ said Devynius.

‘When the bodies are gone,’ said the baron.

‘Now,’ said Devynius. ‘Brothers,’ he voxed to his squad. ‘Report. Casualties?’

‘I’ll need patching up,’ came the reply from Brother Timesus. ‘It’s more a humiliation than a hindrance.’

‘Took a hit to the thigh,’ added Brother Oiolas of Thaxos’s fire-team. ‘I’m still mobile.’

With the penetrative power of the tau pulse rifles, that was a fortunately low tally of casualties. Two hit, and neither badly. That was the only fortunate thing about the events of the last few minutes.

‘Why did they bring guns?’ asked Baron Maelenar. ‘And why in here, in the chamber?’

‘Because the tau wanted a bloodbath,’ replied Devynius. ‘If we had arrested the xenophiles quickly and quietly, the people of Port Memnor might never hear of it. The xenos gave their followers guns and told them to fight back if the Imperium played its hand, so there would be deaths that cannot be ignored. People like Lady Solheindal-Thess here were supposed to help stabilise the city so we could root out the xenophiles and take control of the spaceport without violence. Now, there will be violence. This scene will be repeated a hundred times in the streets. Look on the wages of conspiring with the alien, baron. The tau would see everyone in Port Memnor shot down like this if it meant they could deny the city to the Imperium.’

‘We must calm the population,’ said Baron Maelenar. ‘A gesture. A link between the Imperium and the people of Briseis, something significant. Magos Skepteris is the most senior official of the Imperium in the city. We will use her.’

‘Do it soon,’ said Devynius. ‘Word will be on the streets already.’

Functionaries and servitors were already picking through the carnage, finding survivors and summoning help. A few shocked-looking nobles and officials, evidently those who had experience with administering medical aid, were being herded into the chamber to staunch the bleeding of those who could be saved. Soon industrial servitors would be brought in to cart away the bodies and begin clearing the debris. Devynius didn't know where Baron Maelenar would convene his new council, but it wouldn't be here.

'Your orders, captain?' said Brother Thaxos.

'Withdraw to the Lawkeepers' Precinct,' said Devynius. 'We can do no more good here. Space Marines bring fear wherever they go, even when we don't want to. Our presence will make it impossible for the baron to calm things down.'

'And then?'

'The mission continues,' said Devynius. 'Our objectives are unchanged. This went poorly, but the xenophiles are gone from the city's government. That at least has been accomplished. The spaceport remains our primary goal.'

'Of course, captain. Brothers! Move out, we are done here!'

As the Ultramarines moved out of the chamber, a servitor dragged the two halves of Lady Solheindal-Thess out of the smouldering debris, beginning the long and perhaps impossible task of scouring the stain of death from Port Memnor's parliament.

The Chrono-Wrights' District was the heart of Port Memnor. It was the oldest quarter of the city and the centre of its precision engineering industry. Its buildings were the oldest in the city, the first constructed by the tribes brought together by the Imperial colonists, all age-rounded stone forming alleyways and switchbacks around hidden fountains and courtyards. Channels in the narrow streets siphoned away the heavy metals and toxins used in the countless small workshops, draining them away into the city's sewers. The resulting chemical haze hanging around the district forced the younger labourers and artisans to wear rebreathers – the older ones had become immune to the effects, their lungs blistered and leathery like weather-beaten skin.

It was those older workers, the veterans of Chrono-Wrights' District, who emerged first. It was a pre-appointed hour, passed by word of mouth at etching tables and clockworkers' benches. As one tens of thousands put down their tools and came out into the open, still wearing the battered acid-stained overalls over work-tightened muscles. They rolled up their sleeves and exposed their chests to reveal the tattoos and scars marking them as members of the ancient Briseian tribes. It was not done in the city to display adherence to the old ways so openly – it was far more the fashion to deny that ancient and savage past when the

people of Briseis had roamed the blasted landscape and carved out lives from the unyielding slate. Now they wore those symbols proudly: the clouded planet, the knot of snakes, the crossed swords, the shattered mountain.

The streets filled. The narrow alleys were choked and the fountain squares were crowded. Banners were raised, carrying the same symbols the people wore on their skin. Few spoke – this was a grim business, a necessary one, and one they did not take on lightly. It was a gathering on a scale that had not been seen for centuries, not since the Port Memnor Water Tax Riots, and while those times had been sparked by spontaneous anger, this was an organised gesture that even the Imperium could not ignore.

Sergeant Seanoa watched the crowd grow. It would soon be impossible to move through the streets of the Chrono-Wrights' District at all, even for Space Marines. From the window of the clock tower he could see the organisers moving between the people, passing on instructions, messengers and heralds appointed by whoever orchestrated this protest.

'We could cut them down from here,' said Tagamala, Seanoa's squadmate. 'Load up with Stalker shells and snipe them one by one.'

'There would be bedlam,' said Seanoa. 'Crushes and stampedes.'

'And a great many xenophiles would die,' said Tagamala. 'Is that not why we are here?'

'The portents of the knife gather around you,' said Seanoa, regarding his fellow Jade Dragon. Tagamala's armour and his faceplate were scored with deep marks cut by a heated mono-edged combat knife, to match the scars he wore on his face beneath. The designs on his armour wove the images of his portents into it – knives, serrated edges and hooked fangs. 'Those are the only thoughts you have. If you could slit every throat in this galaxy you would do it, but sometimes a knife through the neck is not what we need.'

'If the Ultramarine has you so scolded, then why carry a gun at all?' said Tagamala.

'Speak thus again, brother, and we will see just to whom the knife comes easiest,' replied Seanoa. 'There is a place on our fleet where a blade is placed between us to see who will get to it first.'

There was no anger in Seanoa's voice, no more threat than the bearing of a Space Marine naturally gave him. Other Chapters might rely on a chain of command and deference to rank, artificial constraints on the souls of men. The Jade Dragons organised themselves according to the rules of nature, to the apparent capacity and willingness for one to kill another. Other Chapters would not understand such bonds, at once brotherhood and predation. It was one of the

many secrets the Jade Dragons kept.

The clock tower was at the heart of the Chrono-Wrights' District, itself a clockwork marvel with a face bedecked with thousands of automated soldiers that fought a battle on the stroke of every hour. Its lower workings connected to Port Memnor's mass transit system, which made it a useful base for observing events in the Chrono-Wrights' District. As the people had spilled into the alleys, the Jade Dragons had been drawn there by the scent of conflict, to watch and wait.

A preacher's voice was raised over the low murmur of the throng. 'Your Emperor watches!' he cried. His voice was hoarse, as if he had been pontificating non-stop for hours. 'Your Emperor hears! He will snatch you up and cast you into the sky!' He grabbed a woman by the shoulders, shaking her. 'Your loved ones! Your friends! The penance will fall upon all!' He was an old man with a drawn and pale face, in dark robes that dragged down in the effluent channel running down the street. He wore a heavy pack with bundles, pans and trinkets hanging off it – an itinerant preacher, a missionary who went from place to place spreading the word. The backbone of the Imperial faith when the Ecclesiarchy was far away.

One of the workers wrapped an arm around the old man's throat and hauled him away from the woman. Others crowded around him and he disappeared from view, now just a ripple in the crowd as the protestors laid into him with boots and fists.

'Who will throw off the yoke?' cried out one of the assailants, holding a bloody fist high.

'All of us!' came the reply from all around. Banners unfurled from top floor windows. 'Briseis will rise! The tribes will rise!'

Bright gunfire streaked into the sky, fired by hidden gunmen.

'Pulse fire,' voxed Seanoa. 'Stand by.'

Chanting and singing broke out, rippling back and forth across the district – heretic hymns of freedom and independence. The Imperial eagle was dragged down from above the doorway of a factorium. A column toppled and a statue fell. More banners were held high, stained with age, hung with fetishes and scalps.

One of them was the hide of a sea creature, gnarled with barnacles. The tribesmen gathered around it wore the garb of the Thundercliff tribe, their bare torsos covered with serpentine coils, what little they wore in the dark green of their tribe. Two of them clambered onto the upper level of a fountain, unravelling the banner down to the ground. The sea monster's spine ran down the middle of it and the skin of its many webbed limbs hung on either side. Men

and women of the Thundercliff rallied around it, chanting and singing as the fronds of scaly skin flapped around them.

‘Do you see it, brothers?’ voxed Seanoa.

‘I do,’ said Brother Tagamala.

‘And I,’ said Brother Vai’ia.

One by one the squad sounded off, looking on from the windows and rooftops of the watchtower.

‘Because I must be sure,’ said Seanoa, ‘that you see what I do. I cannot stand up and speak of it without knowing my brothers have in their hearts what I have.’

‘Then pronounce on it, brother-sergeant,’ said Tagamala, taking his part in the ritual forms that had to be gone through if the portent was to be properly recognised.

‘It is the sign of the Black Leviathan,’ said Seanoa. ‘The Leviathan is among us on Briseis. Some have asked why the fates brought us into the battle for Agrellan, onto this planet. Now we have our answer.’

The Jade Dragons kept their secrets. Some, from themselves.

They spoke to no one of their home world. Perhaps the planet, with the recruiting population and fortress-monastery, was abandoned, the Chapter’s banners still hanging from its deserted battlements. Perhaps it was a wasteland, its surface melted to glass or reduced to radioactive rubble, or even obliterated entirely by war or stellar disaster. Perhaps they had never had a home world at all, and had always travelled the galaxy on a fleet of rapid attack ships that appeared and vanished as they willed it. That was one secret they kept.

It was possible that someone could stumble on their home world, or that the truth of their world was hidden in the depths of some Administratum records-house. A deeper secret, one that no accident could bring to light, was the omens that drove them.

Every Jade Dragon was surrounded by omens that gathered towards him, drifting through fate to cling to him. He saw them in the stars, in the corpses and ruination of every battlefield, the visions they saw in their meditations and the thousand random events that could be interpreted every day. One might see knives everywhere. Another saw the flight, the wheeling of a host of predators in perfect coordination. Thunderclouds heavy with the promise of lightning. Birds of prey. Guns. A grinning face. They moulded a Jade Dragon to their image, and every time he saw them in an enemy’s wound or the sliding past of the stars he adhered a little closer to their omen’s way of killing. Whenever he saw it he gave thanks to the fates that had shown it to him, and sought out the next enemy on

the battlefield to inflict the prophesied way of death.

But there were greater omens, omens of the void, that touched the whole Chapter when they emerged from the blackness between the stars. Emerging from a warp jump on the way to the Gravenhal Crusade, the Jade Dragons fleet had witnessed a formation of stars shaped like a great archer, drawing back his bow and firing off a supernova that filled that quadrant of the sky with silver fire. When the Jade Dragons saw the archer next, be it a tribal enemy with a bow or the logo on a burned-out manufactory, they saw it as a sign to strike now, strike hard and leaving nothing back to caution, for that was how the Gravenhal Crusade was won. Before the massacre at Ramnes Point the Chapter had witnessed a binary system, one star flaring bright, the other black and dead, and so the omen of a face with one eye gouged out and the other wide open told them their allies would turn on them. These were strong omens, the mightiest, read from the stars by the Chapter who alone could read His will written by fate.

As we hunt, so we are hunted. Thus went a secret that novices were told as they were implanted with the black carapace and took on the armour of a Jade Dragon. Just as they were seeking their own omens, they learned that the Chapter was not the greatest predator in the ocean of space. There was another that stalked them everywhere they went, looming out of sight to be glimpsed once every few centuries in the shadow of a dead world or hiding among the flares of a bloated star.

This was the Black Leviathan. It had been there from the start, since the murky time when the Jade Dragons Chapter was founded. It was the darkness within them and the treacherous enemy without, it was deceit and perfidy incarnate. It was, above everything, betrayal. The Black Leviathan was the shadow of the Great Adversary, of the gods of the warp, of the corruptive and infinite enemy that men called Chaos.

When the Jade Dragons saw the Black Leviathan, they knew that Chaos was close. The daemon and the witch worked their magics when the Leviathan was near. When the Jade Dragons glimpsed its shadow, caught its scent, then Chaos and all its madness and betrayal were sure to follow. In form it was a great dark mass trailing tentacles, a drinker of starlight that left suns dark and cold in its wake, sometimes with a planet-sized eye rolling in the seething blackness, sometimes with a vast maw that dragged in everything in its path. It had picked off Jade Dragons spaceships before, leaving them scarred with the coils of its tentacles and crushed of all life, the battle-brothers inside crumbling skeletons within their armour. Even as the Jade Dragons hunted, the Black Leviathan hunted them in turn, a constant reminder that they were not the sole predators in the galaxy.

They told a tale, perhaps one that had originated among the voidborn of the Imperial space lanes, perhaps gleaned by the Jade Dragons from a captive taken among the worshippers of the dark gods. They said a champion among the betrayers sought to impress his gods by cutting a sliver of flesh from the Black Leviathan and wearing it as a cloak or hanging it as his standard, a mark the gods of the warp could not ignore. When next he was seen he lay dead and drained of life on a world chewed and mutilated by the Leviathan's coils. In the champion's hand was the hide of the Black Leviathan.

The Leviathan's hide was the same as its shadow. It brought the same weight of portent with it. No Jade Dragon would mistake the gnarled pelt of the sea creature held in mockery of them. None would see anything but Chaos in the future.

The Ultramarines were automatons, blindly obeying a codex and the words of a long-dead primarch. They were blinkered to the truth, if that truth did not tally with what they had been taught and witnessed before. The Jade Dragons were not so constrained. Devynius and his Ultramarines might ignore it, but Seanoa and his battle-brothers knew who the true enemy on Briseis was.

CHAPTER THREE

‘Why do we fight? There are many answers, but one will always ring true. Look upon the worlds of your Imperium, upon the cities, and above all upon the people. That is why you fight.’

– Codex Astartes

The sun was high, a searing point of light in the black sky. The disc of Agrellan was half-full, the rest of it dipping below one horizon, the sooty wilderness between its hive cities streaked with the spires of Port Memnor’s skyline. Twelve figures were marched out onto the rockcrete promontory jutting from one of the upper class hab-blocks that clustered a short distance from the parliament building. This district of Port Memnor was in the grander Imperial style, with walls shored up by eagle-headed buttresses and every street junction watched over by a statue in marble or bronze of sector governors and Imperial nobles. It was normally stern and magnificent, but that noon it was more sombre than usual and none could deny the tension in the air.

The twelve hooded figures shuffled, heads bowed, at the order of the sergeant of the Memnoran Peacemakers. A squad of Peacemakers, the armed police force of the city, watched over proceedings as the prisoners lined up.

Captain Devynius watched from the adjoining apartment in the hab-block. Outside the window, which opened onto the promontory as if onto a balcony, the sergeant took a ledger from one of his troopers and began to read from it.

A crowd had gathered. It had been filtered by the Peacemaker soldiers stationed in the streets nearby – most were well-to-do citizens of Port Memnor, wearing more subtle echoes of the ruling class’s fashions. The wizened figures

of tribal elders stood apart, shadowed by Peacemakers and their own attendants, for it was important that they be made a part of proceedings. A substantial number of those watching were from Briseis's media, using picters and boom vox-catchers to record the events.

'We should be seen,' said Procurator Kolnis. 'You especially.' He looked very much at home in the apartment, his black greatcoat matching the severe décor of devotional paintings and furnishings in mourning colours.

'I am still uncomfortable with conducting our business publicly,' said Devynius. 'The Ultramarines are soldiers, not diplomats.'

'Believe me, lord captain, the sight of you is one of the most useful assets we have,' replied the procurator. He was a man of the Administratum, one of the few Imperial officials in Port Memnor. His job was technically limited to ensuring the planetoid supplied its portion of Agrellan's tithe to the Imperium, but in effect he had been in charge of monitoring and fighting the growing xenophile threat before the Space Marines had arrived. 'The massacre at the parliament has riled them up. They took to the streets in the Chrono-Wrights' District. My people say they're one step from rioting, and Throne knows we don't need that. The xenophiles could commit who knows what atrocities under the cover of such unrest. They must be scolded, these people, shocked into inaction and obedience, and the sight of a Space Marine in the city will do that. Perhaps you do not know, lord captain, the effect such a sight has on an Emperor-fearing soul. No doubt the people of Macragge are used to an Ultramarine on every street corner. Not so here.'

'I concur,' said a third member of the party. The voice was flat and measured, and came from below the hood of a floor-length dark red cloak. Magos Skepteris was the most senior of the civilian Imperial personnel on Briseis, but she was not minded to take such a visible place in civil affairs as the procurator. Her responsibility was oversight of the laser defence batteries and associated plasma generators that defended the city's spaceport, and she had very much the air of someone who would rather be there than here. Only the lower half of her face was visible – her skin was pale, her chin sharp, and rather distractingly her teeth were steel. One of her arms had been amputated at the shoulder and replaced with a trio of mechadendrites that hung, braided and coiled, around her neck like a massive gorget of steel snakes. 'It behoves us to make all use of the resources at our disposal. Our task here is at least in part a psychological campaign for the suppression of rebellious intentions and the discouraging of xenophile sympathies. To be presented with such a symbol of Imperial capacity for violence will crush many intentions of sedition.'

'We must make use of more than fear,' said Devynius. 'It is devotion to the

Emperor and loyalty to their fellow men that will move these people to root out the xenophiles. Not fear.'

'Not fear alone, granted,' said Procurator Kolnis. 'But believe me, fear should come first.'

'The crimes are as follows,' the sergeant outside was saying. This task fell to the local law enforcement of Port Memnor but no one would be ignorant of the hand of the Imperium behind it. 'The placing of the Emperor's goods and persons in the hands of the xenos enemy. The denouncing of the Emperor and His divine right. The sheltering and protection of xenos inimical to mankind. The setting of explosives. The dissemination of heretical literature and ideas. Murder of an Imperial official. Also several charges of common murder, theft and wounding. These charges to comprise a manifest and undoubted instance of heresy, foulest of crimes, striking as it does against mankind itself. The sentence pronounced is death.'

'Captain?' said the procurator. 'Shall we?'

Devynius followed the procurator out of the grand windows onto the promontory. The rockcrete expanse had been used as an execution ground by the nobles of Briseis since the first towers of Port Memnor had been raised. The chambers adjoining it had been much prized for the excellent view of the executions, which could be observed by the inhabitants over a glass of strong wine and music. Now many of the noble families had quietly left Port Memnor, leaving only those involved in its government or who thought they had a way of profiting from the growing unrest, leaving places like this empty.

Devynius emerged into the noon sun. The reaction was loud and immediate. The onlookers gasped and cried out. Some were dismayed, others shouted prayers of thanks that the Emperor's Angels of Death had come to Briseis. All of them were afraid. Picters clicked and whirred, trying to get the best shot of the armoured giant who had suddenly appeared. Beside him, the procurator and even the outlandish and rarely-seen magos were diminished to mere details. Devynius's armour had the gilded trim that marked him as a captain of the Ultramarines, and he went without his helmet to reveal a blunt, dark-skinned face with a wide and intelligent brow the picters zoomed in to capture. A pict-servitor took flight, buzzing on tiny rotors as it hovered as close as it dared to steal the image of the Ultramarine and transmit it to the city's media.

'I'm sure they would appreciate a few words,' said the procurator.

'I'm sure they would,' replied Devynius tightly.

The sergeant ordered five men to stand forward. They were the execution detail, selected by lot from the Peacemaker squad. They were armed with rapid-firing lascarbines, their power packs supercharged to deliver greater killing

power. It reduced the charge capacity, but only one burst of fire was needed here. The troops stood to face the prisoners, who were lined up against a wall that bore the scars of having been riddled with las-fire and resurfaced many times. The sergeant walked along the line of prisoners asking if they wanted their hoods removed. Some did, most did not. The revealed faces were of clockmakers, dirty and scarred, eyes bleary from years staring at tiny cogs on black velvet. Those eyes widened at the sight of Devynius, and were fixed on him rather than the soldiers about to shoot them. They murmured prayers under their breath, as if asking if they were dead and were being confronted by a vision of the Emperor's justice come to usher them into the afterlife.

Devynius watched as the sergeant gave the order to ready arms, and to take aim. The unhooded prisoners did not take their eyes off Devynius as a volley of las-fire sheared through them, the sharp cracks of superheated air mingling with the gasps from the crowd. The bodies fell, and those not called upon to perform the execution stepped up to take on clean-up duty.

'Good,' said the procurator. 'Always a nasty mess when things don't go to plan.'

Devynius glowered up at the picter-servitor, which backed off and panned across the bodies. They lay in spreading pools of blood in undignified heaps. The clean-up detail were unfurling black corpse bags ready to cart them away in a waiting Peacemaker ground vehicle.

'The xenos wanted the massacre,' said Devynius. 'They have their hooks deep into this city. We cannot keep killing until the xenophiles are all gone, or we will not have a city left for the Imperium to make use of.'

'Then your battle-brothers had better root out the aliens before it comes to that.'

'Most citizens,' said Devynius, 'do not speak to a Space Marine thus.'

'I hope, captain, to rule this city one day soon,' said the procurator. 'What remains of the parliament cannot do it. That Baron Maelenar boy cannot do it, he's no more than a child. This world needs a governor. It will be my duty to govern in the God-Emperor's name. I can hardly take on such a responsibility if I flinch in fear when confronted by even one so intimidating as yourself. Not that I don't feel some of that fear and awe with which the prayer books instil us.'

The crowd were departing, the media crews getting the last shots of the bodies as they were zipped up in their bags. One of the onlookers was escorted onto the execution ground by a Peacemaker trooper – it was an elderly woman, her head bent and face lined, thick grey hair tied in long plaits. She wore long dark green robes and walked with a stick as gnarled as she was.

'One of the elders,' said the trooper. 'Of the Thundercliff.'

‘Tribals, lord procurator,’ said the Peacemaker sergeant, who was making a determined effort not to stare at Devynius.

‘Tribals,’ repeated the procurator wearily. ‘What does she want?’

‘It is not with you, lord procurator,’ replied the elder. ‘Nor with the Angel of Death. It is with the magos.’

Magos Skepteris tilted her head in as profound an expression of surprise as she seemed able to summon. ‘With me, elder?’

‘The deaths at the parliament have stirred up the people,’ said the elder. ‘This you know. These executions and their timing are surely intended to remind the people of their subservience to the Imperium. But this alone will not keep them in check. I can read the pulse of the people as you cannot, my lords. Trust me when I say this.’

‘And what solution do you suggest, elder?’ asked Magos Skepteris.

‘Only this. The magos is the most senior of the Imperium’s servants on Briseis and, due to her limited interaction with the people, is seen as impartial. A gesture by her would do much to quell the anger of our people.’

‘I am not accustomed to presenting a public face,’ said Skepteris.

‘There need be minimum effort on your part,’ said the elder, ‘and the good name of the Priesthood of Mars shall be preserved. A mere ceremony, performed for public consumption, according to the traditions of our world. We request, magos, that you become a member of the Thundercliff tribe.’

‘Now, now,’ interrupted Procurator Kolnis, ‘such a thing would be gravely irregular. The officials of the Adepta have stayed well clear of tribal politics.’

‘And thus the gesture will have all the more import,’ said the elder. ‘Trust me, lords, this is not a step we undertake lightly either. Extending membership of the tribe to one not born to Briseis has never been even suggested before. But we of the Thundercliff love our world, and we despise the unrest in its streets. If we can help quell it without bloodshed or the oppression of fear, we shall do so. It is the best way to preserve our way of life and fulfil our duties to the Imperium.’

‘My own duty,’ interjected Devynius, ‘is to see Briseis secured for the use of the Imperial war effort on Agrellan, with the minimum of violence against its people. Any proposal that will turn the people away from the xenophiles is one I would support.’

The elder bowed her head in Devynius’s direction, showing deference but none of the fear Devynius was so used to. ‘My thanks, lord captain. Some among the tribes fear you, and say you can only be here to do great bloodshed among us. But the Thundercliff are loyal, and rejoiced when the Angels of Death were revealed among us.’

‘I shall think on this, elder,’ said Magos Skepteris.

‘That is all we ask,’ said the elder. ‘The tribe desires greatly the elimination of the alien influence on our people. We, the autochthonous of Briseis, born from the earth, hate the alien with the passion of our Lord Angel here. However you choose to destroy the xenos and the xenophile, the Thundercliff shall stand with you.’

The Peacemakers were hosing the blood off the promontory and moving among the lingerers in the crowd, scattering the onlookers. The elder was escorted back off the execution ground, her piece said. Devynius noticed how the remaining media crews took pains not to point their picters at the elder as she shuffled past a statue of a past governor and out of sight.

Down among the tombs, the trail had warmed up. Thaxos had lost it in a great necropolis of black stone where ancient kings had been buried thousands of years before. Their saint-king cults remained as the thousands of niche-tombs for the servants and sacrifices buried alongside them, and the monumental heads that lay, split and shattered, which once had glowered across the broken stone lands of Briseis. Thaxos got his last glimpse of the quarry among the fallen features of one pre-Imperial king, and by the time he had scrambled up the broken brow ridge it was gone.

Brother Keltus found the trail again. The quarry had been winged by a bolter round and he spotted the smear of blood on the broken finger of a monumental statue’s hand, long severed from its arm. The enemy had leaned here to catch its breath or patch up its wounds, and had moved on. It was slowed by the action and the Ultramarines had quickened their own pace, for they were closing in.

‘Keltus, report in,’ voxed Thaxos as he clambered over a heap of necropolis rubble and found himself looking across a long black chasm, the depths reaching further into the ancient past beneath Port Memnor. ‘We’re out of visual.’

‘I’m fifty metres down, pursuing,’ replied Keltus. ‘I can see him.’

‘Do not get too far ahead,’ said Thaxos. ‘He’s leading us. There could be more.’

There was a ledge, caused by a shifting of the strata of the chasm wall, barely wide enough for a fully armoured Space Marine to navigate. Thaxos’s boots crumbled chunks of rock from the edge as he began the journey down, spotting Brothers Inigens and Oderac on the other side of the chasm half-sliding down a drift of stone fragments. Thaxos’s fire-team were advancing from all sides to corner and trap the quarry. The Ultramarines fought side by side, like primitive phalanx soldiers, when it was appropriate, but Thaxos’s fire-team could be cunning hunters as well when the situation warranted it.

A river glinted at the bottom of the cavern. The darkness down among the

tombs was so profound even Thaxos's augmented sight could barely make it out as it rushed and foamed.

'He's out of sight,' came the vox from Keltus. 'But he's cornered. He's trapped. There's no way up.'

'If there is,' voxed Brother Venarin, 'I'll see him.' Venarin was a marksman, as fine a shot as Thaxos himself, and his custom bolter was loaded with long-range Stalker shells and a preysense scope. Thaxos could just make out Venarin crouched at the lip of the chasm, sighting down his bolter.

Bolter fire crackled from below. 'Contact!' voxed Keltus.

Thaxos scabbled as fast as he could down the chasm face. The river grew closer and the rushing of its waters louder. He picked out another sound – the high hiss of pulse fire, familiar from the firefight in the council chamber.

'Multiple contacts,' voxed Thaxos. 'Venarin! Do you see them?'

'Not from here,' replied Venarin. 'I am displacing.'

Thaxos stumbled the last dozen metres. Foaming dark water rushed up to meet him and he strode into it, the pull of it trying to drag him down and wash him away. Flashes of crimson light up ahead marked the continuing pulse fire, underscored with the low thudding of bolter volleys. Thaxos's own bolter was up in front of his face, every eye movement tracked by the barrel as he had been sleep-taught since novicehood.

Thaxos rounded a corner and saw the enemy. They were barely visible in the dark and clamour – their faces were completely hidden in the featureless helms of their armoured suits, the desert camouflage incongruous among the tombs. He spotted two or three of them at the side of the river, the red filaments of their rifles' laser sights playing across the rock where Brother Keltus crouched. Thaxos fired almost without having to will it, the order coming from the warrior's part of his brain cultured and trained by sleep-teaching and veneration of Guilliman's Codex Astartes. A volley of three bolter shells thudded into the torso of one tau, the explosive bolts blasting off an arm and ripping open the torso. Thaxos counted three more visible, scrambling for cover among the rocks.

Keltus leapt to his feet and followed up, two well-placed shots taking down another tau.

These were fire caste warriors, Thaxos remembered. The tau society was based around castes, not just social but physiological – the fire caste had quick aggression and athleticism, the water caste cunning, the earth caste physical strength, the air caste reflexes. The fire caste were trained by the tau cadres as excellent shots and participants in the combined arms manner of tau warfare. They were not trained to face a Space Marine in any context, save down the sights of a pulse rifle.

Thaxos didn't have to give the order. Keltus was charging even as Thaxos sprinted through the filthy, foaming water, rattling off half a bolter magazine to keep the tau ducking behind the fallen rocks at the base of the chasm. He vaulted over a rock and crashed into the tau sheltering there, crushing the alien's body beneath all the weight of Space Marine and armour. He brought his combat knife out and lashed it at the nearest fire caste standing – his reach was more than the tau had expected and the blade cut through the front of its helm, the monomolecular edge propelled by augmented muscles. The tip cut through the helm into flesh and the tau reeled backwards. Thaxos was on the fallen tau, plunging the blade into the tau's throat, hauling the alien into the air and blasting three shots into its chest at point-blank range.

Brother Keltus cracked his quarry around the side of the face with the stock of his bolter. As the alien reeled Keltus shot it in the abdomen and put another round through its head as it fell.

A fire caste leapt out from cover, rifle levelled at Thaxos. The side of its throat exploded and its head snapped to the side before it could pull the trigger. Thaxos didn't have to look up to know that Brother Venarin had taken it down with a Stalker shot.

'Where is the target?' voxed Thaxos, before the last fire caste warrior had plunged into the water.

'They were covering his retreat,' said Venarin. 'There's a structure up ahead.'

'Down here? A tomb?'

'Don't think so.'

'Forward,' voxed Thaxos. 'Tighten up. Take it prisoner if possible, shoot if you must.'

Past the bodies of the fire caste warriors the chasm took a sharp bend, the water rushing over chunks of fallen stone. The tumult almost hid the entrance to a tunnel in the chasm wall, a solid steel frame surrounding a blast door. It looked as out of place down here as anything could.

'Blow this open,' voxed Thaxos. 'Oderac, melta bombs!'

Oderac had a practical and level head, making him the team's field engineer when no Techmarine was present. He carried the squad's melta bombs and a demolition charge, and scabbled down the remaining slope into the water. Venarin remaining overlooking the chasm as the rest of the fire-team took cover and Oderac attached the melta bombs to the side of the door with magnetic clamps.

The bombs radiated tremendous heat, melting deep glowing red holes in the door. Molten steel spat and hissed in the water. Oderac stepped forward again and forced the demolition charge into one of the holes, twisting the primer.

‘Ten seconds!’ he voxed.

‘The alien is perfidious and cunning,’ said Thaxos. ‘But we shall force him to show his hand. No longer will he hide. And when the light of justice is upon them, there is no escape from the sons of Macragge.’

The demolition charge went off. The autosenses built into the Ultramarines’ armour deadened the sound so they were not deafened by it. The door was blown open, torn petals of steel splayed wide enough to allow a Space Marine entry.

Thaxos took the lead. The other Ultramarines of his fire-team followed him in. Harsh white lights flickered inside, picking out steel floor and white wall panels, and signs in the tau language pointing deeper into the facility.

Ahead was a larger chamber, the walls lined with transparent-walled cages. A large brushed steel table stood in the centre of the room, a smaller table beside it covered in fine silver medical implements designed for three-fingered tau hands. Thaxos glanced at the cells – they had a single drain in the floor and a single slot in the front wall, and nothing else. Against the back wall were two automated guns, cylindrical units containing pairs of pulse rifles. They were deactivated, any fugitive here moving too quickly to turn them on to defend the place.

‘He is desperate,’ voxed Thaxos. ‘He will err. We will not. Be sharp.’

Thaxos waved for Oderac and Keltus to move one way, he, Venarin and Inigens the other. Machinery covered the walls up ahead of uncertain purpose, in the featureless casings typical of tau technology. The antiseptic smoothness of every surface indicated alien minds free of faith, without the guidance of belief in the God-Emperor to guide them. The very cleanliness was unclean.

Thaxos caught up with their quarry in the facility’s interrogation chamber. The purpose of this room was clear given the man strapped, naked save for the harness affixing him to the wall, among a tangle of pipes and cables hooked up to his body. Thaxos took in the detail as he scanned the room for targets and saw one – crouching behind a white cabinet that might have been a cogitator housing or a storage unit for interrogation implements. The hint of movement was enough to draw Thaxos’s eye.

The alien’s limbs were too long to be folded up completely behind the scant cover. It had chosen, in its desperation, a bad place to hide. It had made many mistakes in its life, chief among which was standing against the interests of the Imperium, but its choice of this place to shelter from the Space Marines would be its last.

‘I know you speak Low Gothic,’ said Thaxos. ‘One chance. Surrender.’

‘Please,’ came the reply in the dry whisper of the tau voice. ‘We can coexist. Just listen.’

‘One chance,’ said Thaxos.

‘There is something greater than the war between us. Greater than the pride of our species. You are wise among your people. You have not the narrow minds of its citizens. There is a Greater Good...’

Thaxos took two long strides to the alien’s position and dragged it out from cover. It was one of the water caste, the diplomatic strain of the tau species. It was not built for physical conflict, with its spindly limbs and pigeon chest over which its orange and black robes hung loosely. It had a pistol in its hand, a compact pulse weapon, and Thaxos snapped its wrist with a jerk of its arm so the pistol clattered to the floor. The alien whimpered.

‘Report,’ voxed Thaxos.

‘Clear,’ replied Keltus. ‘Your orders?’

‘Prepare to deny the facility to the enemy,’ said Thaxos.

‘Listen,’ said the alien, its voice hoarse and broken. ‘It is not too late for our species. We two, we can start it. A dialogue. For peace. For truth. For...’

Thaxos threw the alien to the ground and levelled his bolter at it. ‘I think this thing counts as a moral threat,’ said Thaxos. ‘Brothers? Do you concur?’

‘I do, Brother Thaxos,’ replied Venarin.

‘Thank the Throne for that,’ said Thaxos, and shot the alien through the chest. The bolter shell detonated inside it, spreading its shattered ribs out through his back. It was dead before its broken form sprawled onto the ground. Huge black eyes turned dull and glassy in the harsh light of the glowstrips on the ceiling.

‘He’s alive,’ said Brother Inigens. Thaxos turned to see Inigens examining the body restrained against the wall. Now he had time to look closer at the captive he could see the chest was rising and falling, and readouts in the alien alphabet winked steadily on displays set into the wall panels.

The captive’s mouth was obstructed by a gag from which several tubes and pipes ran. Inigens undid a catch on the gag and slid it out, pulling a long slimy tube from the captive’s throat. The captive was a man in middle age, evidently in fit and good health. The fittings around his face came away and Thaxos saw the well-worn features of soldier.

The man coughed phlegmily and his eyes opened, squinting in the light. He gasped back a choking breath in shock at the sight of three Space Marines standing in front of him.

‘You are safe, citizen,’ said Thaxos. ‘The xenos are dead.’

‘Dead?’ spluttered the captive.

‘Very dead indeed,’ said Thaxos, indicating the water caste corpse.

The captive chuckled weakly at the sight of the body. ‘Savages,’ he said. ‘Heathens. We will kill them all.’

Inigens removed the restraints one by one, supporting the man’s body until he

could be lifted down from the wall. He knelt on the floor coughing, chest heaving.

‘Your name?’ asked Thaxos, removing his helmet. When dealing with civilians, the more human face was the better one to show. He took out a data-slate and cycled through various intelligence files on its screen.

‘Dwynen Vular Kesseoth,’ replied the captive. ‘Explicator Errant. In service to Inquisitor Vengel Prianze, Damocles task force conclave.’

Thaxos flicked through pages of names. Dwynen Vular Kesseoth was among the Inquisitorial agents known to be operating in the system, deployed in their dozens by the Inquisition to embed themselves in Imperial settlements and watch for signs of xenophile treachery. ‘Your call-sign?’ he asked.

‘Dawnlight,’ replied Kesseoth.

‘Then I hope you are enjoying the sights of Briseis, Explicator Kesseoth,’ said Thaxos. ‘How did they capture you?’

‘The xenophiles had men in the Peacemakers,’ said Kesseoth. ‘I bedded down in the precinct-house, woke up down here. Must have drugged me.’

‘Did you talk?’

Kesseoth looked up at Thaxos. His eyes were rimmed with red. ‘I don’t know,’ he said.

‘Melta bombs set around the entrance,’ voxed Oderac. ‘They’ll bring the ceiling down.’

‘We’ll get you to the surface,’ said Thaxos, helping Kesseoth to his feet.

‘I must ask for a weapon,’ said Kesseoth. ‘They have a lot of xenos down here, that much I know.’

‘Your sidearm, brother,’ said Thaxos, and Inigens handed his bolt pistol to Kesseoth. The weapon was made for a Space Marine and Kesseoth had to hold it with both hands.

‘Stay alert,’ said Thaxos. ‘We have killed all that stood before us but there may be more. The alien could have got a distress call out. Normally I would relish the chance to kill a few more of them but we have a guest to think of now. Move out.’

The Ultramarines left the facility, emerging into the darkness of the chasm. Venarin scouted ahead, Keltus watching their rear.

‘Wait,’ said Kesseoth as they began to forge through the rushing water. ‘There’s a defence system. Drones. They’re stationed across this region. If they were alerted, they’ll come in from overhead.’

‘Eyes up, brothers,’ said Thaxos, glancing towards the distant stone ceiling of the tombs. He could see nothing in the grey-black expanse.

Kesseoth held out the bolt pistol in front of him, barely able to lift it. ‘For the

Greater Good,' he said, and shot Brother Thaxos through the back of the head.

CHAPTER FOUR

'No doubt the vaunted general is confident he knows all that is required to outfight and confound his enemy. No doubt the enemy opposing him knows exactly the same thing.'

– Codex Astartes

The generatorium dominated the west of Port Memnor, its exhaust stacks and cooling towers defining the cityscape. The enormous cylinders of the generators were clad in age-stained rockcrete, criss-crossed with gantries and cranes. The blocky shapes of the turbine were halls covered with industrial gothic flourishes insisted on by the city's Imperial founders. Shanties crusted around the base of the buildings, nestling precariously on the banks of open industrial sewers.

A short distance away was Port Memnor's spaceport, enormous hexagonal landing pads served by hundreds of fuel tanks and control towers. Hidden beneath the pads, beneath enormous hydraulic hatches, were the defence lasers that made the spaceport such a valuable asset for the Imperium to take control of. It would allow large space-bound ships to disgorge their complements of Imperial Guard men and tanks, then taken to Agrellan itself on faster armour transports that could weather ground fire from the tau advancing across the planet. But there were xenophiles everywhere, including among the thousands of men and women among the crews of the generatorium and spaceport, and the Imperium could not land its ships until the traitors were rooted out of Port Memnor.

In the heart of the generatorium complex was the personal domain of Magos Skepteris. It was into this web of dark chambers and corridors that the small

party from the Thundercliff tribe were admitted, among them the old woman who served as their elder, and a number of men and women inducted into the tribe's mysteries. They carried tribal fetishes, the shed snake skins and staffs cut from the trees watered by the bloodshed in the beast pit beneath the cliff, and were escorted through the labyrinth of Skepteris's lab complex by a detail of Peacemaker troops.

Picters followed them, their operators carefully shadowed the Peacemakers. They were not permitted to film details of the complex unnecessary to the broadcast. They passed by the strange exotic machines for generating and transferring strange forms of energy that crackled fingers of electricity between their polished brass spheres.

Magos Skepteris waited in her receiving chamber, a room barely ever used for she was not a diplomat at heart. Banners hung displaying the heraldry of the Priesthood of Mars and an altar of pure carbon blocks was stacked up by one wall, with an icon of the half-skull and cog that was the symbol of the Mechanicum.

'Is this necessary?' said Skepteris as the delegation filed in. She glowered at the technicians aiming their picters at her.

'The gesture must be seen if it is to serve,' said the Thundercliff elder. 'Or it will be as if it had never happened.'

'Very well,' said Skepteris.

'You will need to let blood,' said the elder. 'Just a little. Blood is essential. Without it there can be no bond to the earth of Briseis.'

'That will not be a problem,' said Skepteris. 'My pain centres have been replaced with data storage.'

'Then we may begin,' said the elder.

The picters began to whir as the delegation surrounded Skepteris in a robed circle. She was draped with garlands of braided snake skins and the elder pronounced a ritual in the native tongue of Briseis, the language with which its tribes had greeted the Imperial founders of Port Memnor. One of the ritual attendants rolled up the sleeve of the magos's robes and, finding one of the few areas of skin that had not been replaced with data ports or radiation shielding, drew blood with a long golden needle. Drops of it were poured into a bowl made from an animal skull and the elder sang, the attendants taking up her song in the same sibilant language.

'Briseis is cruel,' said the elder now in Low Gothic as the singing continued. 'Briseis thrusts us into her stony world and takes us out just as suddenly. But in the time between, she gives us the greatest gifts. Minds, that we may understand. Hands, that we may create. Souls, that we may join them in brotherhood. And

she is not jealous. One may enter her embrace that was not born to her cruelty, to partake of her gifts yet not suffer a birth into the plains of slate and the forests of beasts. Blessed indeed is such a newcomer, and exalted indeed. This honour Briseis extends to Magos Skepteris of Mars, Priest of the Adeptus Mechanicus, and through our hands she welcomes her.'

The picters focused in on Skepteris's face, which was still half hidden by the cowl of her red robes. The ceremony paused and the ritual attendants turned to Skepteris expectantly.

Skepteris glanced between them and the lenses of the picters, and seemed to realise that a speech was expected of her. Not being used to such things, she had not prepared anything.

'I thank you,' she said flatly. 'The Adeptus Mechanicus thanks you. For this honour.'

The silence that followed indicated that Skepteris was finished.

'Then from this moment,' said the elder, 'you are a member of the Thundercliff tribe and a child of Briseis.'

The attendants unravelled a bundle they had brought with them, revealing it to be a large expanse of animal hide, scaled and craggy with barnacles, exuding a strong smell of brine and faint decay. This mantle was draped over Skepteris's shoulders, swamping her with its size and heaviness.

'Sister,' said the elder, placing a hand on Skepteris's mantled shoulder.

'Sister,' said Skepteris.

The picters zoomed in on the pair, and the ceremony was complete.

The xenophile corpses had barely begun to turn cold when the broadcast began. Sergeant Seanoa had led his squad in at the first vox suggesting the safehouse location, and had shown no pause or mercy.

The safehouse was three floors, two below ground, none free of corpses. They lay shredded by bolter fire or carved clean open by chainblades, killed in the bedlam of a predator's feeding frenzy, the battle-trance that came over the Jade Dragons when the fight turned to wanton butchery and their way of war permitted abandonment of tactic and restraint.

The Ultramarines could not fight like that. Their Codex Astartes did not acknowledge that Space Marines were predators, as surely as the ravenous hunters that drifted between the stars. It was a fine book, certainly, full of generations of battle-wisdom. But it was not the whole truth of war. The truth the Jade Dragons knew.

Seanoa was on the upper floor, the one that resembled a workers' dwelling with several rooms of bunks and communal kitchens. The Jade Dragons had

fallen on the people here as they had everywhere else – those living there as camouflage for xenophile activities were as guilty as the xenophiles themselves, and had been exterminated. Torn bodies and severed limbs littered the floor and the instep-deep blood rippled with the footsteps of the Jade Dragons moving around on the lower floors looking for survivors. Outside, the street was overlooked by one of the district's many enormous screens which broadcast civil information, prayer services and the recent exhortations to report xenophiles and suspicious activity. The screen was covered in a mesh of thin bars to protect it from missiles thrown by disgruntled citizens, and as Seanoa passed by the window the screen lit up.

It showed the image of Magos Skepteris, surrounded by citizens in the dress of one of Briseis's tribes. The ceremony proceeded and Skepteris was enrobed and pronounced a member of the Thundercliff tribe.

Finally, the magos was draped in the skin of the Black Leviathan.

And Seanoa of the Jade Dragons understood at last what he was on Briseis to do.

Captain Devynius stood over the body of Brother Thaxos, lit by the harsh lights of the glow-globes in the transport hub. The back of Thaxos's head was gone, the cranium missing behind the line of the ears. His face was mostly intact. His eyes, ruptured red by the bolter's detonation, had been closed.

'All the xenos on Agrellan are not worth a single Ultramarine,' said Devynius. 'Especially not Thaxos. His blood is on the hands of the water caste, and on those of every tau. If we did not have anything to avenge upon them before, we do now.'

The rest of Devynius's squad stood around the bench on which Thaxos's body had been lain. The body's armour had been removed, revealing the old scars of his augmentations and the new ones of battle. The squad had no Apothecary to remove Thaxos's gene-seed – the body would have to be transported back to the Chapter for the organ to be taken out ready to be implanted into a novice, and for the flesh of Guilliman to pass on again.

'If you wish to speak freely, brothers,' said Devynius, 'then now is the time. I give you leave.'

'It was not a way for an Ultramarine to die,' said Brother Venarin. Venarin had snapped the prisoner Kesseoth's neck a second after the fatal shot had been fired.

'And our mission has gone awry since the moment we landed here,' said Brother Silen. 'The massacre, then this. And the Jade Dragons are not allies I trust. We do not even know where they are right now, save that they are somewhere in the Chrono-Wrights' District doing Throne knows what.'

‘Then we take the initiative,’ said Devynius. ‘Thus does the Codex Astartes state. We do not react, we act. The mission continues as planned. The early stages have not gone as they would, but the next will bring the Emperor’s will to Port Memnor. We cannot bring Thaxos back but we can avenge him with victory. The war effort on Agrellan relies on us. We shall not let them down.’

‘Pray, brothers,’ said Silen, who by unspoken assent was now Devynius’s second in command. ‘Take your own words from the Codex and the rites of Macragge, search your own soul for the armour of faith and the sword of hatred. But pray, for soon there will be no time for words.’

The members of Devynius’s squad knelt one by one around Thaxos’s body as Devynius shrouded the body in a corpse-sheet. They all murmured their own prayer, some to the machine-spirits of their wargear, some to the long-dead heroes of the Ultramarines, some to the Primarch Roboute Guilliman himself. All of them asked for victory.

All of them asked for revenge.

The loss of the outpost in the tombs had been a blow, but it had been prepared for. Such assets were not essential, and in cases of aggressive persecution by an enemy could be considered disposable, obstacles for the enemy to overcome before he could make real headway. It was part of the water caste’s way of silent invasion, always evading instead of coming to battle, giving the enemy just enough to draw him on and commit his resources without making headway into the core of the subversion strikeforce.

A far more important installation was hidden among the shanties and rat-trap hubs that adjoined the Chrono-Wrights’ District, far from the affluent districts around the palace. It was concealed among the labyrinth of hab-blocks, its entrances accessible only through camouflaged firing positions. It was not armoured, for its defence was secrecy, and it was not heavily staffed because numerous personnel would be a liability and not an asset. It was crewed by a handful of water caste interrogators and emissaries, an honour guard of two fire caste warriors, and a complement of Briseis’s most dedicated and trusted gue’la – the hateful Imperial term for these loyal humans was ‘xenophile’, but the tau took pains to educate them that they were valued and respected converts to the Greater Good.

The shanty facility was the more important of the two major bases in Port Memnor. The conversion of the city could be achieved without the fire caste facility, but not without the intelligence base the water caste had built down amid the poverty that had turned so many Briseians to the Greater Good.

Behind a disguised blast door at the back of a particularly filthy and ill-

omened shanty, the salvaged boards and plastic sheeting gave way to the gleaming purity of tau architecture. Two of the xenos moved down a narrow corridor, past the choke point covered by a pair of gun drones mounted in the ceiling. One was a water caste ambassador, the same who had met with the Thundercliff elder in the tombs beneath Port Memnor. The second was a fire caste warrior, a shas'vere in command of this mission's fire caste complement, squatter and more powerful in build wearing combat armour and armed with a rapid-firing pulse carbine slung at his side. The knife of the bonded ta'liserra was inscribed on his shoulder guard, marking him out as the leader of a squad whose members had sworn to fight and die together by the Greater Good.

'I fear,' said Ambassador O'Myen, 'his mind has been picked clean. I have envoys working on him day and night. He will not last much longer.'

'If you have indeed mined him dry,' said Vre'Cyr, 'then should the effort prove too much for him, we will not have lost anything much.'

'True,' said O'Myen. 'What is it you hope to find?'

'Anything will be useful to us,' said Vre'Cyr. 'Space Marines require a particular form of warfare. They are rarely encountered, and survivors to debrief are rarer still.'

'Then have at it,' said O'Myen.

A door slid open to reveal the interrogation chamber. O'Myen's envoys were monitoring the equipment keeping the captives alive. Most of them were Imperial spies or Port Memnor dignitaries, kept for what they knew about the defences and society of the city. An earth caste technician worked the controls of the medical gear and one of the dozen captives shuddered in his restraints as stimulants and metabolic balancing agents were pumped into him. The captive's eyes snapped open and he stared down from his cage on the wall, convulsing with the effort of being woken once again.

'Our data indicates that this is an older specimen,' said O'Myen. 'Lifespan extended with their rejuvenation technology. They are so obsessed with their lifespan, these creatures. It is one of the many factors that makes them exploitable. They fear death so. Without the Greater Good, there is nothing to fight for save for another day alive.'

'They all look the same to me,' said Vre'Cyr.

The captive's eyes focused again, and the confusion on his face was replaced with despair.

'Is it the day?' whispered the captive, his voice ruined by the tube in his throat. 'The day when I am to die?'

'What is your name?' asked O'Myen.

'Throne be damned, you know my name!' gasped the prisoner.

‘What is your name?’ asked O’Myen again. ‘If you do not answer aversion stimuli will be applied.’

The prisoner’s head hung. ‘Thelso DeNyre,’ he replied.

‘Your rank?’

‘Lord Archivist of the Librarium Penitentiam on Morkrut.’

‘The Lord Archivist here,’ explained O’Myen, ‘was quite the coup for the Second Phase Expansion intelligence corps. It seems we are more effective at sifting through the bureaucracy of the Imperium than the Imperium itself. The knowledge he has absorbed over a lifetime of labour is often lost to the Imperium at large. Thus in some respects we know more about them than they do. Lord Archivist, tell us of the *Codex Noctis Verminion*,’

The archivist’s head lolled to one side and twitched.

‘It is accessing the data implant in the back of its cranium,’ said O’Myen. ‘Its purpose was a mystery when this one was first processed. Thankfully it was not removed immediately.’

‘The *Codex Noctis Verminion* presents a history of the hunt for the Infinity Wurm,’ began the archivist. ‘Led by Lord Inquisitor Trentis Venn and...’

‘The Jade Dragons,’ said Vre’Cyr.

‘Two battle companies of the Jade Dragons Space Marine Chapter were present,’ said the archivist. A drop of blood ran from his eye down one cheek as the strain of repeated accessing of his datavault continued to damage his nervous system. ‘Led by Captain Nuufalao the Huntsmaster...’

‘Their way of war,’ said Vre’Cyr. ‘Their weaknesses. Will they fall prey to the Patient Hunter or the Killing Blow? The Seven Spears? The Final Shadow? Speak!’

‘Fast assault and shock tactics,’ droned the archivist. ‘Evidenced by the landings at Fedoran IV. Suitable for morally deniable operations... Ecclesiarchical oversight denied, suspected... suspected deviant ritual faith...’ The archivist coughed and spat gobbets of blood down his front, splattering the clean floor.

‘I can be certain you know everything the archivist has divulged about the Jade Dragons,’ said O’Myen. ‘They were a subject of the first interrogation cycle, especially when it became apparent knowledge of them was not available in the Imperium at large.’

‘Then the Ultramarines,’ said Vre’Cyr.

‘Among these creatures,’ said O’Myen, ‘the Ultramarines are preceded by great fame. You will be here some time, shas’vre.’

The archivist spooled out tale after tale of the Ultramarines. They concerned endless battles, tactics first written in the *Codex Astartes* and preserved in

fragments the archivist had crammed by their thousand into his datavault. O'Myen had no interest in them. He had plumbed the archivist's mind for everything he cared about – the way the Ultramarines thought, the weaknesses among their beliefs and worldview. Humanity had been conditioned to think the Space Marines invincible and without flaw, but they had more than enough failings to be exploited by a veteran of the water caste. Pride was among them, as was their adherence to the Codex Astartes and the teachings of their long-dead Primarch Roboute Guilliman.

'Where will they strike next?' demanded Vre'Cyr. 'Where on Briseis will they make their move?'

Archivist DeNyre stared blankly up at the fire caste leader. There was only confusion and fear in the human's face.

'It matters not,' said O'Myen. 'There is no action the Space Marines can take for which I have not laid the groundwork.'

'I can only hope you are correct,' said Vre'Cyr, 'for the sake of my fire caste brethren. The Space Marines are few in number but when they strike, they strike hard, and focused for the maximum impact. The hunter cadres have few counter-tactics to the Space Marines – it has been one of our greatest setbacks in the Third Sphere Expansion. If we do not respect them, we are done for.'

'I respect them well enough, shas'vre,' said O'Myen. 'It is for that reason I was sent to Briseis. We knew the Space Marines would be here. My task was to observe the city and all the possible paths a Space Marine operation in this city could take. Thus far the Ultramarines and Jade Dragons have followed those paths as surely as if I myself was leading them. And I will lead them to the end of whatever path they will take, a path that leads only towards the Greater Good.'

'You make a tool of everything around you, ambassador,' said Vre'Cyr. 'Enemy and ally. It would not surprise me to learn that your fellow tau were just instruments to you, to be used and disposed of as you will.'

'Not as I will,' said O'Myen smoothly. 'As the Greater Good demands of me.'

The tau re-attached the archivist to his life support systems, ignoring his weak cries for mercy and death. Soon the pipe was slid back down his throat and he was silent. As O'Myen and Vre'Cyr left the place, the silence was broken only by the ticking and bleeping of the machinery.

The Codex Astartes was obscure on some points, ambiguous on others, but on the subject of surprise it was clear. Tactical surprise is the greatest advantage any fighting force can have in war. An enemy fights two battles when he is taken by surprise – he must fight his own inertia, the chaos of sudden assault, the ancient

instincts to flee or hide, even before he can take up arms and face any enemy.

A Space Marine was not ideally suited to stealth, which any other soldier might use to claw back an edge of surprise. A Space Marine's sheer bulk made it almost impossible for him to hide or creep in silence, and the pride he took in his Chapter meant that, with few exceptions, he would not cover his colours with camouflage. The Codex therefore endorsed surprise by means of a rapid and furious assault from an unexpected angle, achieving with speed and suddenness what could not be achieved with silence. The Space Marines made use of the drop pod and gunship assault, the boarding torpedo, the armoured spearhead to snatch up the initiative and plunge an enemy into battle before that enemy knew it was being fought.

Captain Devynius knew the Codex well. No Ultramarine was ignorant of Guilliman's masterwork. And so it was that he crouched alongside the battle-brothers of his squad on the lev-train as it thundered along the track, passenger stations and loading docks hurtling past through the strobing darkness.

'Three minutes out!' called Brother Silen, reading the transit system's schematics from his auspex scanner. 'Unorthodox, captain! I wonder if Guilliman envisioned this when he wrote?'

'He imagined victory,' said Devynius over the thundering of the passing structures and the howl of the lev-train's overcharged coils. 'And this is how we will win it!'

The squad was in the rearmost carriage of four, the front housing the powerful generator which was being drained dry to force the train well past its maximum speed. According to the schematics, the train could not stay on its tracks if it maintained this speed when it hit the next major junction.

'Then again,' reflected Devynius, 'this was Thaxos's idea.'

'Would that he were here to see it,' said Brother Merovos, whose plasma gun was slung so he could hold on to the railing beside him with both hands. 'He would have something clever to say about our chances.'

'We fight this like any other battle and our chances will be nil,' shouted Devynius in reply. 'The Emperor demands victory. The Codex commands it. We will deliver.'

The train shrieked through a passenger station. The controls had been doctored and bypassed by Oderac who, while not a Techmarine, had a more than good enough head for technology. The citizens waiting on the platforms had expected the train to stop to pick them up – instead it shot past at tremendous speed and they screamed as several were thrown off their feet by the gale that passed in the train's wake.

Perhaps word would get out about the Ultramarines in the rearmost carriage. It

didn't matter. They had less than thirty seconds before they reached their target, and any warning would arrive far too late.

Ahead the junction approached, lit by warning lights flashing red. A terrible metallic scream filled the air as the train tried to take the next bend too quickly and the magnetic clamps were torn off the rail, the train slewing onto one side as it arrowed onwards.

Devynius kept his footing. A couple of the Ultramarines lost their balance, grabbing onto a handhold before they were tumbled through one of the windows that shattered under the strain.

The front carriage slammed into the wall of the tunnel. The wall collapsed and the carriage was propelled into the rooms beyond it, masonry falling in the dark hail. With an awful sound of tearing metal the front carriage was forced to a halt, embedded deep in the foundations of the building ahead. The second carriage buckled and crumpled to half its length, and the third fared little better. The fourth carriage was warped and twisted but not enough to imperil the Ultramarines still clinging on.

No normal soldier would have countenanced it as a method of insertion. That was why the Ultramarines had used it to score tactical surprise against the enemy inside.

Thus was the spirit of the Codex adhered to, if not its letter, as Captain Devynius led his squad through the wreckage and the rubble into the lower floors of the generatorium.

Sergeant Seanoa's totem was the flight, the swirling pack of predators that moved as one with the same purpose. That was how his squad moved, following him less by orders and more by instinct. Seanoa was a natural leader in the purest sense, born to be at the head of the flight, born to be the first teeth into the prey.

They broke into the open among the shanties at the foot of the generatorium's great cooling towers, cloaked in the pollutant mists and the darkness where the complex's floodlights could not reach. The people who lived there shut themselves in, bolted their windows and doors, and hoped to survive until the sun came up. The Jade Dragons were angry ghosts breaching the surface of the night, and the ancient fears of Briseis's tribes spoke of such monsters rising from the slate wastes to mutilate and destroy. They were not far wrong.

Seanoa led the squad up the lower levels of gantries, up towards the command catwalks allowing maintenance access to the cooling towers. The walkways connected to the main building housing the turbine hall and command rooms. The workers who saw them fled, and not a shot had to be fired before the Jade

Dragons reached the turbine hall itself.

The generatorium was at full capacity. The turbines roared, shuddering the web of catwalks high above the main hall. The first kill was one of the sentries who watched over the hall for xenophile saboteurs, sniped through the upper back with a Stalker shell. His body fell several storeys to the floor of the turbine hall and vanished between the huge cylindrical housings of the turbines.

Two more died, one to Seanoa's own lightning claw. He didn't even activate the weapon's power field as he punched the weapon's curved blades through the sentry's back. The sentry wore the dark red uniform of men under the orders of the Adeptus Mechanicus, and carried a lasgun he never had time to unsling. Seanoa kicked the body over the railing.

'There,' he said, pointing towards one of the control rooms overlooking the turbine hall, a short sprint across the walkways. 'Expect resistance. Be swift, and do not wait to see a weapon. Move, my brothers.'

The ten-strong squad were hindered more by the size of their armoured bodies in the narrow doorway than by the generatorium workers manning the late shift in the control room. The shock on their faces was illuminated by the lights on the readouts and control panels lining the walls. Seanoa shot one with his bolt pistol, the customised weapon blowing a torso wide open with a fragmenting metal storm shell. It was overkill, but that was better than underkill.

The Jade Dragons making their way into the room added their own fire, single bolter shots taking down the half-dozen workers in a few seconds. A vox-link handset on the wall was untouched – none of the workers had time to grab it and raise the alarm. That was a minute or two more of time the Jade Dragons had bought with their speed and lack of mercy. That was how true predators won the day.

Tagamala affixed a charge to the command room's back wall, magnetic clamps holding it to the control panel. The Jade Dragons backed up against the wall. Seanoa didn't have to say anything. His squadmates knew the plan well enough and filled their part in it like true flightmates.

The charge went off and the wall was blown inwards. Seanoa was through the breach before the debris hit the floor. Beyond the architecture changed. The practical industrial face of the turbine hall was replaced with the religious overtones of the Priesthood of Mars: columns topped with half-skulls and cogs, shrines built into the walls with offerings of raw metal blocks and clockwork trinkets, machine-code prayers pinned to the walls. The air was thick with incense burning in the braziers that provided a guttering light.

Seanoa didn't wait for his squad. They would be behind him. They always were. He forged through the Mechanicus chambers, passing by equipment rooms

and laboratories where ornate crucibles burned exotic elements and generator towers spat arcs of electricity.

The alarm had been raised. A klaxon blared somewhere. The Adeptus Mechanicus had brought in more men and armed them to defend this place, in response to the xenophile presence in the city. Seanoa had seen the troop manifests, and he knew they would not be enough.

Three troopers burst into the laboratory as Seanoa led the squad through it. Las-fire met him and he dropped down behind one of the lab benches, the slab of solid bronze absorbing the fire. Bolter fire streaked back across the room and as the troops took cover, Seanoa vaulted the bench and fell among them. He shot one through the stomach and lashed through the other with his lightning claw – the power field activated this time and burst in a shower of light as it discharged through the second trooper, shredding his upper body and leaving nothing left above the mid-chest.

The third trooper was shot down by a bolter round from the other Jade Dragons moving through the room. The firefight had lasted about five seconds.

Ahead was the chapel, overlooked by a great altarpiece of the half-skull, a fat industrial diamond set into its eye and the cog half plated in brass. Columns of polished steel rose towards a vaulted ceiling covered in machine-code script, zeroes and ones mingling with equations picked out in electrum.

There, Magos Skepteris was performing her prayers to the machine-spirit of the generatorium and the defence laser complex she watched over, and to the Ommissiah of whose intellect they were all a part. She knelt before the altar and turned at the sound of the Jade Dragons' footsteps booming on the steel grille of the chapel floor. She still wore the hide of the Black Leviathan over her shoulders.

The magos stood as Seanoa crossed the chapel floor. The rest of the squad stood back – their guns were ready in case they were needed, but for now this was their sergeant's fight.

'Why are you here?' demanded Skepteris. 'This is a place of worship.'

'I know what you worship,' said Seanoa coldly, 'and it is not the Ommissiah. You may have fooled the Ultramarines but we are not so stupid. The mark of the Black Leviathan is on you, heretic. As we hunt, so we are hunted, but sometimes fate brings those that hunt us into our gunsights. And so you will die.'

'I am loyal,' said Skepteris. 'I am dedicated to destroying the xenophiles and doing the Emperor's work.'

'I care nothing for the xenophiles,' said Seanoa. 'Briseis and Agrellan can burn for all we care. Fate put us here to destroy you.' Seanoa pointed at Skepteris with the blades of his lightning claw and the blue-white light of the power field

flickered across the columns and the shadowy vault of the ceiling.

Skepteris fought back. Her augmentations had enough combat capability to give her a good chance against xenophile assassins. Her mechadendrites whipped around Seanoa, who grabbed them in the crook of one elbow and twisted, throwing Skepteris to the ground like a wrestler. He slashed down at her with his claw but she was faster than she looked and rolled out of the way, the mechadendrites slithering out of Seanoa's grasp.

Skepteris's jaw opened wide, too wide to be natural. Between her metal teeth emerged the barrel of a gun, the slotted heat dissipater of a melta weapon. She fired a bolt of superheated particles that burned a deep furrow through one of Seanoa's shoulder pads, scorching through the ceramite down to the bone. Seanoa roared and ducked behind a column, molten ceramite running down his side.

'What witchery has taken root on Briseis?' shouted Seanoa. 'What dark god sent you here? You will answer the Emperor in hell!'

Skepteris stood, the gun barrel withdrawing back down her throat. She turned to see the Jade Dragons squad standing across the chapel, cutting off any escape. Every bolter barrel was aimed at her.

'I can kill one of you,' said Skepteris. 'But the chances are low. And then I will die. So there is no logic in resisting. Use no more of the Emperor's bullets on me than you have to.'

She did not turn as Seanoa walked up behind her, the power field crackling around his claw. He rammed the blades through her midriff, carving upwards through her chest and out through her upper back. Her head flopped forwards on its ruined neck and Seanoa caught her as she fell forwards. He slashed across her waist and cut her in two, shreds of burning robe and hide falling among the showering blood.

'I will waste no bullets on this creature,' said Seanoa, dropping the upper half of Magos Skepteris to the floor.

The bodies formed a trail from the turbine hall to the chapel, marking out the progress of the Jade Dragons. Some of the bodies were still alive, by some fluke their vital organs spared the bolter shrapnel, leaving blood loss and shock to finish the job.

One of them, a Peacemaker soldier, dragged himself on bloody hands into the command room. The place was choked with smoke from the charge that had blown the wall out, and draped with the bodies of the workers who had died there with no idea why. The floor was slick with blood and the trooper's hand slipped in it as he dragged himself forwards.

He reached one of the control consoles. Lights still winked on its readouts. He grabbed the ankle of the body lying over the controls and pulled it away, letting it flop to the floor. A handset came away with the body, dangling by a wire, and the trooper held it to his face.

‘Whoever hears,’ gasped the trooper. ‘What brothers there are out there. I know one of you must hear me. The generatorium. They are hitting the generatorium. Tell the ambassadors, tell everyone. For the Greater Good.’

CHAPTER FIVE

‘The enemy will use every wile of battle against you, every truth you have learned herein, every hard lesson that war has taught you. The general who thinks himself unique in his learning is merely the next head hanging on the wall.’

– Codex Astartes

The Ultramarines plan was simple, but that did not mean it was easy. The generatorium and the adjoining defence laser complex were always the primary objective for the Space Marines in Port Memnor, but it was the endgame, the capstone of the campaign to bring the planetoid to heel. Any tactician of the Imperial Guard would identify a cascade of objectives to be toppled one at a time, culminating in the conquest of the defence lasers to make the spaceport safe for Imperial use.

Space Marines did not think like that. They did what had to be done, fight the battle that had to be fought, and ignore everything else. They would not reduce the xenophile strongholds, fortify the parliament and the places of worship, assist in the evacuation of Imperial personnel or establish garrisons throughout the city. They would go for the throat, for the heart of the victory, trusting in their superiority in battle to make everything else irrelevant.

So Captain Devynius led his squad into the lowest levels of the generatorium, where the lights were few and the shadows were deep. It was a relic of the first days of Briseis’s Imperial settlement, where the burgeoning city had been fuelled by fat iron boilers surrounded by a tangle of corroded pipework. The structure had been dropped from orbit shortly after the Imperial settlers had first broken

ground on Port Memnor, then forgotten and crushed beneath the mass of the generatorium for centuries.

Devynius emerged into the coolant complex, enormous refrigerated storage tanks reaching seven storeys above the labyrinth of pipework. Freezing mist clung to the lower levels, swirling around the Ultramarines as they burst through from the below.

‘The objective is the defence laser command,’ voxed Devynius. ‘Through the coolant towers, into the defence complex. Do not get held up. Once we have the complex, the xenophiles will never get us out.’

The generatorium workers fled at the first sight of the Ultramarines. They had all heard what had happened at the parliament house. There was no impediment to the squad making their way up to the mid-levels, moving towards the laser complex adjoining the generatorium.

Soon the towering vault of the laser cathedral loomed ahead. Six enormous laser cannon stood around the huge circular hall, forming a great place of worship dedicated to the Omnissiah. An icon of the Machine Cult stood in the centre of the arena-like central expanse, a hooded titan surrounded by a cog halo and carrying the power axe that symbolised the Priesthood of Mars. The first magi to oversee the defence lasers’ construction had consecrated this place, the rituals repeated by every magos since up to Skepteris.

‘Hold this place,’ said Devynius. ‘Oderac! Barricade the entrances, take whoever you need. I need to get onto the vox and bring as many workers in as we can to help. The xenophiles will strike as soon as they realise we have moved, but we will throw them back to their tau masters in pieces!’

‘They cannot weed us out of here,’ said Oderac, looking around the cathedral. ‘This monument to Imperial might, this icon of majesty! We can hold this for years, my brothers.’

‘I wish the xenophiles had been rooted out first,’ voxed Devynius as the squad spread out to cover all the ways in. ‘And this city could have been taken without bloodshed. But they are dug in deep, my brothers. They will come to us, they will beg to die on our blades. If they will refuse the Emperor’s mercy I fought so hard to show them, they will get the Emperor’s wrath in its place!’

The laser complex was highly defensible, built to be garrisoned by Imperial forces. Destroying the xenophiles had been at the forefront of the Space Marines mission objectives, but the ultimate goal had always been holding the defence lasers and hence securing the spaceport for Imperial transports. The xenophiles would die, and many innocent citizens, as they were forced to mobilise against the complex, but the Ultramarines would hold it. Briseis would suffer, as Devynius had sought to prevent, but the Emperor’s will would be done and the

forces fighting on Agrellan would be bolstered.

This battle would be won. Agrellan would be won, and this war after it. It was the Emperor's will.

Devynius's thoughts were broken by the metallic howl from above. A section of the ceiling bowed in and fell, a shower of wreckage and flame pouring through. His squadmates scattered across the cathedral floor.

Through the flames it descended. The hard lines of its shape were framed in the fire that shimmered against the chrome-bright surrounds of the reactors built into its chest, echoed in the blue-yellow jets of flame from the exhausts on its back. It was huge, not far shy of an Imperial Knight demi-Titan in scale, one arm holding a massive multi-barrelled pulse weapon and the other the glowing vanes of a shield generator. Twin reactors glowed on either side of its massive torso, its reverse-jointed knees bending to absorb the shock as it hit the cathedral floor. Burning wreckage crashed into the floor around it as the missiles racked around its shoulder angled towards Devynius.

The design was unmistakably tau. The lenses in its head dilated as they focused on Devynius. Smaller machines were descending around it, their jets firing to land.

Devynius had never seen anything like it, save the early battle assessments from the war on Agrellan. A new form of battlesuit, a bipedal machine with the firepower of a super-heavy tank and manoeuvrability equal to anything the tau had fielded before. Until now only a few grainy pict-captures and garbled field reports attested to their existence. The tau treatment of technology was their most blatant heresy – they created, they innovated, constantly forging new machines to fight their expansionist wars. This machine was their latest, a huge and massively armed iteration of the smaller Crisis battlesuits now dropping into the cathedral behind it.

'Riptide!' shouted Devynius over the vox as he ran. Two missiles streaked towards him, screaming on trails of white exhaust. A few strides away was the statue of the Omnissiah and Devynius dived past the folds of its sculpted robe.

One missile hurtled past the statue and exploded against the far wall. The second hit the statue, blowing it in half at the waist, sending chunks of torn bronze falling in scorching rain around Devynius. The upper half toppled, the head of the statue's axe burying itself in the floor.

Devynius broke from cover, snapping shots up at the Riptide. Its burst cannon followed him, tracking unerringly. It could punch through power armour as if it wasn't there.

Devynius dropped onto his back. He had one shot before the Riptide's cannon speared right through him. He had trained for such a shot a thousand times in the

firing ranges of Macragge, against drone-servitors in the proving grounds. Thaxos had been a better shot than he was, and Venarin was better than either. But Devynius was an Ultramarine, and there was no facet of the Codex Astartes he had neglected. Marksmanship included.

The bolter kicked in Devynius's hand. The Riptide's eye lens shattered, spilling sparks like burning blood.

It would not last. The tau battlesuits had redundant sensor systems that kept them lethal even when their primary sensors were destroyed, but it would buy seconds, and seconds were what Devynius needed.

The other Ultramarines were fighting the Crisis suits. Each suit was the personal war machine of a tau fire caste veteran, armed with the exotic xenos weapons with which that warrior was most proficient – fusion rifles, missile pods, burst cannons. Brother Silen was down, clutching the wreckage of a ruined thigh, firing with one hand from his back. Merovos and Oderac brought one Crisis suit down with combined fire, Merovos's plasma gun scorching a deep molten furrow across the battlesuit's chest, the flesh of the alien inside bubbling and popping in the heat.

Devynius could see the next few moments unravelling in his mind. The pages of the Codex Astartes seemed to turn before his eyes and every movement, every shot, was picked out in the hot glow of fate.

And Devynius knew that Merovos would die. Merovos paused, gunfire streaking all around him, and took stock of the Riptide battlesuit stomping around the ruined statue to finish off Devynius. Merovos saw his commander stricken and the huge battlesuit turning its burst cannon towards him. Merovos raised his plasma gun, sighting down it, picking out the weak spots in the hulking machine as years of sleep-taught battle-lore had trained him.

The plasma gun emitted a bolt of superheated plasma, the sound like tearing metal. The bolt sheared into the shoulder joint of the Riptide's gun arm. Molten handfuls of armour fell away and the arm hung limp. The tip of the barrel scraped along the floor.

The Riptide turned, its remaining sensors scanning the direction of the fire that had crippled its arm. The shoulder-mounted missile racks were full again and they tracked towards Merovos, who paused a half-second longer to spray another stream of plasma up into the Riptide's chest.

He was aiming for the reactors mounted on either side of the torso. What little intelligence existed on the Riptide suggested the blocky armoured areas housed the battlesuit's power plant and that if breached, the machine might be destroyed. It was the only chance he had at bringing it down.

The armour of the Riptide's torso held. The sensors of the half-ruined head

focused in on the Ultramarine and the missile racks let loose a trio of missiles that crossed the expanse of the cathedral in a heartbeat.

Merovos was caught out in the open. He had no cover and had stood still to get the shot. The missiles hammered into him and Merovos vanished in a great plume of flame and wreckage.

Devynius had seen it happen a second before the missiles had hit home. It was the way of the Ultramarines – to fight and die for one another, to hold honour above survival. Die if you must, Guilliman had written ten thousand years before, but die well.

‘Fall back!’ yelled Devynius into the vox, scrambling to his feet. ‘We will regroup, we will return! Fall back!’

Runes projected onto Devynius’s retina called out the status of his squadmates. Three runes were dark – Silen, Merovos and Brother Timesus. Three Ultramarines dead to tau guns in the flaming chaos of the cathedral. This should have been their victory.

Devynius sprayed fire almost at random at the Crisis battlesuits flitting between the defence lasers. He spotted some of the Ultramarines making their way towards him, holding together in a line as they fired, keeping the battlesuits on the move to thin the fire coming down at them.

Behind him was a processional down which the servitors would approach the cathedral for the annual rituals to consecrate the defence lasers. It was one of the ways in that Devynius had earmarked to be fortified against attackers. Now it would have to serve as a way out. Past magi of Port Memnor glowered down at him through the hoods of their bronze robes, and incense-servitors droned around the rafters casting billows of sickly smoke.

Brother Vesuvio got there first after Devynius, Timesus slung over his shoulder as Vesuvio fired one-handed at the tau closing in behind. Timesus’s armour was cratered and glowing down his left side, where one of the battlesuits’ fusion guns had hammered him with half a dozen shots. Timesus was almost certainly dead, and Vesuvio would not leave his squadmate behind.

‘Focus fire and keep moving!’ ordered Devynius. ‘Cage your fury, brothers! Discipline! By the Emperor’s will we shall return!’ The rest of Devynius’s squad reached the processional, Silen’s body dragged by a squadmate – there had not been enough left of Merovos to salvage.

‘How did they know?’ growled Vesuvio as the squad moved out of the cathedral and into the tangled mass of coolant ducts in the lower levels of the generatorium. ‘They never knew of our objective. Not even the procurator, not Maelenar, no one. How did the xenos know when and where we would strike?’

As the squad reached the outskirts of the generatorium, where the workers’

habs and shanties clustered around the cooling towers, they came within earshot of the huge screens that broadcast to the people of Port Memnor. And it was then they got the answer.

From time to time, the magi of Briseis would have cause to speak to the population, sometimes to warn of a coolant leak or industrial accident at the generatorium, sometimes to pronounce a new ordinance conscripting citizens into the workforce. It was used rarely, especially by the publicity-shy Magos Skepteris, but the picters and broadcast equipment needed were still stored in the magos's quarters in the generatorium complex. It was this that Sergeant Seanoa used to speak to Port Memnor.

On dozens of screens the cold black eyes of Seanoa's faceplate looked out across the city. He held up one hand so the picter could see what he was carrying. It was the severed head of Magos Skepteris, seen out of its dark red hood for the first time on Briseis. A mass of ribboned flesh hung from below the neck, all that Seanoa's lightning claw had left of her torso. The magos's jaw hung open, revealing her steel teeth and the machinery in her throat. Cables and pipes hung among the gore.

'Thus are the wages of heresy,' said Seanoa. His voice echoed among the spires of spire-habs around the parliament building, between the chimneys of the generatorium and across the expanse of the spaceport's landing pads. It reached into the workshops of the Chrono-Wrights' District, the animal pens of the Slaughtermens' Quarter, the millions of hab-cells and shanties. 'The Enemy sought to convince us the tau were the threat on Briseis. But Fate told us otherwise. The Enemy sought to wage his war in the shadows, but Fate brought him to light. As we hunt, so we are hunted, but on this world we turned and fought back!'

Seanoa cast the head of Magos Skepteris onto the floor of the magos's chambers. The picter panned down to watch it land on the sea creature's hide spread out on the floor. Seanoa's armoured foot stamped down on the head, crushing the magos's skull flat against the barnacled scales.

'The Enemy cannot hide the signs of its passing, not from the Jade Dragons! The Black Leviathan passed by here and left its mark. It left it on the magos, the servant of the Enemy, and she was cut down. It left it on your city, and it shall be purged. You who worship the dark gods, you who lust for the power of the warp, know this! Now you are hunted!'

Ambassador O'Myen watched with satisfaction as the picter turned back to the Space Marine's face, its features hidden behind the faceplate. The screen turned

black as the broadcast finished and O'Myen turned his attention back to the generatorium complex.

O'Myen had wished to observe events at the generatorium directly and so had taken an escort of fire warriors and his detail of lower-ranked water caste to the top of a hab-block overlooking the complex. The signs of battle had been apparent from the buildings above the defence laser housing – fire and explosions from the entrance of Vre'Cyr's fire caste cadre. Like punctuation marks in the history of Briseis, the explosions had marked the end of one age and the beginning of another.

'Record, if you will,' said O'Myen. The water caste emissary beside him, a loyal and hard-working tau who would never rise above his current rank, clacked away on a wrist-mounted data device. O'Myen's words were worthy of preserving, for his was one of the finest minds in all the water caste.

'Upon considering a problem,' said O'Myen, 'one should never seek out the solution as one might pick out a certain star in the sky. There is never a single answer and to hunt it is to chase one prey-beast while a thousand others like it are slumbering at your feet. Instead, we look upon the answers as the roots of a tree, dividing and rejoining, until the tip of every root is the result you desire and to get there you must merely follow the path of cause and effect.

'Let us consider the solution to the problem presented on Briseis. The Imperial elites, the Space Marines as the gue'la know them, have the capacity to hold the defence laser complex indefinitely once they had taken and fortified the place. Thus, we place in motion events that will compromise their effort to do so. Observation, intelligence gathering and the resultant manipulation of the Jade Dragons created several potential outcomes, each of which would generate such a compromise. The first desirable outcome is the turning of the people of Briseis further against the possibility of Imperial occupation. That is the tip of one root, so to speak, and would be achieved by a public and graphic act of violence against one perceived as a friend of the tribes of Briseis. Another root leads to the outcome of the generatorium itself being unable to function properly without the input of an expert in its technology, of which the Imperium has mystifyingly few. Finally, the manipulation may lead to the fire caste response, intended to bring these Jade Dragons to battle, engaging a second Space Marine force in the process of fortifying the defence laser housing.'

A second series of explosions rippled along the roof of the main generatorium building, the red-orange glare flickering against the massive shapes of the cooling towers. From this distance the glow of Crisis battlesuit exhausts was just visible, playing across the gargoyles and arch-tops of the Imperium's grotesque architecture. Quite why the Imperium of Man insisted on creating such visions

of oppression escaped O'Myen, for whom the clean, gleaming lines of tau cities was a vision so emblematic of peace and wisdom. Perhaps it would be a suitable study subject in the future, to provide an insight into the frustratingly wayward Imperial mind.

'Thus we see that true social engineering is the instigation of behaviours and events of which the only possible outcomes are beneficial to the Greater Good,' continued O'Myen. 'To structure such a pattern, a cascading series of inevitably useful events, is the goal of every water caste intervention. In this we see in action previous lessons on the use of an opposing force's qualities against him. The aggression and independence of the Jade Dragons, and the concept of human honour given such import by the Ultramarines, are themselves factors in the success of this intervention. This ambassador can think of no more useful tools in the work of the Greater Good than the Space Marines.'

The emissary finished recording O'Myen's words. They would form part of the great body of work he would leave behind, which later water caste ambassadors would use to further refine their ways of advancing the Greater Good and necessary expansion of the tau empire. Briseis would be a useful prize, Agrellan more so, but the true contribution to the Greater Good would come from the wisdom O'Myen had gathered in solving problems such as had been presented to him in Port Memnor.

'Addendum,' said O'Myen. 'The fire caste win with blades and pulse rounds. The air caste win with fighter craft and bombs. The water caste win with words, and with them we shall deliver more than all our brother castes combined.'

Perhaps the fire caste warriors standing guard on the rooftop would object to that, but they all knew better than to state it out loud. They could whine about it to their captain when they were done on Briseis, if their leader survived.

That reminded O'Myen.

'Vre'Cyr,' said O'Myen into his communicator. 'Report.'

Brother Oderac crawled the last few metres across the floor of the turbine hall. Above him, what remained of the squad were swapping fire with the other Crisis battlesuits across the roof of the generatorium building. Around him rose the din of the turbines, masking the thudding footsteps of the battlesuit that had descended on its back-mounted jets to make sure he was dead. Oderac had fallen Throne knew how far when the roof section had collapsed and one leg had folded under him, broken and useless. He had already taken pulse rounds to the chest and shoulder, punching through his ceramite and into flesh and bone. He was dying.

Looking down from the roof Devynius could see it all panning out in the same

clinical slow motion as Merovos's death. Oderac rolled onto one side, hot blood spraying over the blue of his armour as he unhooked a melta bomb from his waist. He sprawled across to the massive cylinder beside him – the turbine itself, powered by the steam superheated by the plasma reactors.

The Crisis battlesuit stalked into view. A fusion blaster levelled at Oderac, and Oderac ripped the pin out of the meltabomb as he clamped it onto the turbine.

Devynius scanned through the situation, the sleep-taught instincts of a combat leader taking control. His squad was down to half strength. He had taken a shot to one shin that had shattered the bone and though he could still walk, he limped through the fuzz of automatically dispensed painkillers and could feel the boot of his armour filling with blood. Vesuvio had fallen, Timesus still slung over his shoulder, drilled through the back by a volley of pulse shots a few paces from Devynius. The only way forward had been across the roof, towards the walkways and stairwells leading to the tangle of shanty tunnels where the Ultramarines could lose the bulky battlesuits, but until then there was scant cover among the gargoyles of the rooftop.

In the same queasy slow motion, Oderac rolled onto his back. His helmet was gone, shredded by fusion fire, and Devynius could see Oderac mouthing some old curses of Macragge at the battlesuit looming over him.

The melta bomb detonated. The turbine, Oderac, the battlesuit and the turbine hall vanished in a white eruption of steam, shards of shrapnel punching up through the roof. The shockwave hit Devynius and heat roared around him, everything swamped in the white wall of steam rushing up from the explosion.

Somewhere in the storm and bedlam, the rest of the turbine hall roof collapsed. Devynius felt the world yawning open beneath his feet and he fell, every sense overwhelmed. Impacts hammered at him from every direction as if a thousand stone fists were pummelling him.

He couldn't even tell when he landed. The din ended and he was down, one side crushed into the splintered flagstones of the floor. The ruins of the turbine hall came into view as the steam dissipated. Oderac and the Crisis battlesuit were gone, shredded into nothing by the eruption of shrapnel.

Devynius clambered to his feet, as painfully and unsteadily as a crippled old man. His bolter was gone – he still had his bolt pistol and his power sword scabbarded.

The icons on his retina were dark. His helmet was dented and one eyepiece was fractured, a black spider's web cast over his field of vision. His leg was numb and wavering beneath him and the internal breastplate of bone was cracked. He could feel the splinters of bone floating free beneath the skin of his chest. An unaugmented human's chest would have been crushed. Anyone but a

Space Marine would have been dead a dozen times over.

The turbine hall was full of wreckage. The destroyed turbine had burst open in a great torn spray of ripped metal. The structures criss-crossing the hall fallen. Chunks of smouldering wreckage were everywhere. The endless drone of the turbine hall was stuttering and uneven, the other turbines on the verge of tearing themselves apart.

Movement caught Devynius's eye, looming above the shattered turbine. Through the billows of steam emerged the head and shoulders of the Riptide battlesuit. Its gun arm was completely gone, torn off in the fall from the rooftop, its own jets not quick enough to engage. The desert colours were blistered and scraped away, revealing streams of bare metal underneath. Armour segments and loose components hung from the war machine, and the head in which its eyepieces were mounted was half-crushed and wrenched sideways.

Devynius could make out the whining of the Riptide's damaged servos over the turbines. The Riptide stalked through the wreckage towards Devynius, the single remaining lens narrowing to focus. It had seen him.

Devynius drew his sword and pistol. The Riptide cycled two remaining missiles on its launcher.

Devynius could hide. He could hunker down behind cover and hope the missiles didn't tear him apart where he sheltered. He could run and hope that the Riptide didn't just draw a bead on him as he fled, launching a missile to hit him square in the back. Devynius chose neither option.

He ran at the Riptide, pistol up and hammering fire out at the Riptide's mechanical face. Bolt shells burst around its shoulders. Devynius vaulted a bank of torn metal, ignoring the bolts of pain rippling down his leg and through his chest.

The Riptide was, like many war engines of the tau, designed to kill from afar. No xenos species possessed superior firepower technology to the tau. That was how the tau fought – holding off the enemy, pinning them down and herding the disposable auxiliaries of their client races forward to deal with the bloody melee of battle.

It was in that melee that a Space Marine excelled. The ways of the Imperium did not change rapidly, but the Space Marines could learn to fight a new form of enemy rapidly enough if they had to. A Space Marine knew not to face the tau at their favourite range, where they could pick their shots and make the best use of their firepower. He faced them up close, where the tau tenets of war admonished them never to fight.

The first missile streaked at Devynius. Devynius dropped and turned, letting the missile streak over him, the scorching exhaust bubbling the paint of his

armour. He rolled to his feet and the second missile, unleashed too quickly, veered from a target obscured in the smoke from the first. Twin explosions helped lift Devynius as he jumped at the Riptide.

Devynius slammed into the war machine at the height of its massive chest, grabbing the upper edge of one of the twin reactors. The armour plating was hot against his hand. The Riptide's remaining arm reached up at him, a hand sliding out of its housing beneath the missile rack. Devynius drew his power sword and swung, a solid, glittering arc that cast a crescent of light through the Riptide's wrist. The mechanical hand was sliced clean off and clattered into the wreckage below. Devynius found a foothold and powered himself up onto the Riptide's shoulder, drawing back his blade and plunging it into the armour. The power field cracked armour plating and the tip slid through circuitry and machinery, hydraulic fluid spurting like thick oily blood.

The Riptide bucked to throw Devynius off, but he held tight. Sparks sprayed out of the wound. Explosive bolts fired as the Riptide activated its emergency escape mechanism and the torso split open down the middle.

The sealed atmosphere inside was vented as cold vapour. Inside was revealed the cockpit of the Riptide, the fire warrior pilot inside hooked up to his machine with dozens of wires, cradled in a cocoon-like pod to absorb the shocks the Riptide would suffer in battle.

The tau looked up at Devynius. Devynius thought he could detect some recognisable emotion in that alien face. Its lipless mouth was set in a grimace and the nose-slit flared wide. The three-fingered hands were forcing the controls round, trying to throw Devynius off. Devynius didn't think it was afraid – it was desperate certainly, injured, angry. But not yet afraid.

Devynius reached down and grabbed the collar of the pilot's jumpsuit. The pilot tried to draw a pistol from a holster next to the controls but Devynius yanked the alien out of the Riptide, holding it above the cockpit. The pilot's feet kicked unsupported among the severed cables hanging from interfaces all over the jumpsuit.

'What species is this, that butts heads with the Imperium of Man?' growled Devynius. He didn't know if the alien could understand him and he didn't care. 'Have you not witnessed our wrath? Have you not left your dead piled deep enough? Humanity does not kneel! Humanity is no slave-species for you to exploit, alien! If you have not learned that by now then we will teach it to you in death.'

The tau grimaced as it fought to breathe with Devynius's gauntlet around its throat. 'We do this for you,' it slurred. 'For your people. For their freedom. For the Greater Good.'

Devynius rammed the power sword up into the tau's stomach. The power field blew out the back half of its chest, throwing shattered ribs and torn organs across the armoured carapace of the Riptide. The alien's eyes rolled back and went dull, the light glinting in their black lenses extinguished. Devynius dropped the corpse at the feet of the Riptide and clambered down.

His squad were lost, shot down by the tau or killed in the collapse of the turbine hall. He did not know if the same could be said for the Crisis battlesuits, so he wasted no time in making his way across the turbine hall, through the sections of the fallen roof and out into the shanty town that clustered around the base of the building.

The firefight and the explosion in the turbine hall had scared the people away and the city surrounding the generatorium was empty. No doubt the people who lived here were well primed to evacuate the area at the first hint of an industrial accident. Devynius limped through the deserted streets, through the puddles of industrial run-off scum and through the greasy drizzle that had just begun to fall.

His vox was full of static. As he cleared the shadow of the cooling towers it resolved into the regular patterns of a starship's beacon, and he switched to the orbital vox-channel.

'Devynius to the *Polar Defiance*,' he said. He repeated himself, struggling to make anything out through the static.

'Stand by,' came a weak fuzzy voice in reply. 'We're cleaning up the signal.' The vox became a little clearer. 'Captain Devynius, this is the bridge of the *Polar Defiance*, communications helm.'

'Report mission failure,' said Devynius. 'The tau have this city, all of it. Throne forgive me, we have failed. Launch the orbital bombardment.'

CHAPTER SIX

'Suffer any ally, because every gun and sword is to be welcomed into your service. Trust no ally absolutely, for every gun and sword may be turned against you.'

– Codex Astartes

O'Myen had not expected Vre'Cyr to survive. The fire caste were useful, but sometimes their greatest utility lay in situations of danger. The water caste had to balance their immediate benefit against the possibility of using them again in the future, and Vre'Cyr was far more useful dying to deny the Ultramarines the generatorium than he was in fighting any future battles that might come along. It was testament to the stubbornness of the Space Marines that even protected by the armour and guns of a Riptide, Vre'Cyr had not been safe.

The fire caste themselves did not understand. Their own commanders tried to preserve their troops, basing decisions on the suboptimal desire to reduce casualties. The ethereals, infinitely wise though they were, were also compassionate to a fault. That was why the water caste had to be trusted sometimes, with the completion of goals whose means were less palatable to the other castes.

The ethereals would bemoan the deaths among all species. The fire caste would rage at the loss of their brethren. But the water caste would agree that O'Myen had done what was necessary for the Greater Good, and keep the lines of his reasoning to themselves.

O'Myen had left the city by that point, leading his entourage through the gue'la network of tunnels and safehouses to the cemeteries outside the city

limits. There the gue'la had interred their dead, and icons of their strange Emperor-worshipping faith scattered the stony hills. The fire caste crouched among the tombstones, blending with the stony ground in their camouflage mantles. The water caste functionaries huddled around the ambassador as if they were freezing and his knowledge was warmth.

The first streak of fire in the sky did not bring O'Myen joy. The gue'la were odd creatures with their mercurial, tempestuous emotions, their capricious desires and constantly shifting focus. They would find a savage joy that someone they hated was suffering, that they had won a victory against a despised foe. They would whoop and dance, and intoxicate themselves as they so loved to do. O'Myen had seen this happen in his mind a thousand times before and had planned out a hundred lines of cause and effect that led to those first explosive starship rounds breaching the upper atmosphere. Any joy had burned out long ago.

The first rounds hurtled through the middle and lower atmosphere, accelerated by Briseis's own gravity, and speared into the Chrono-Wrights' District. A bloom of orange fire rose over the skyline, throwing a cloud of debris into the air. A clock tower toppled, vanishing in a billow of dust. Secondary explosions peppered the rooftops as the volatile chemicals stored in the mechanics' workshops caught fire.

The main body of the salvo descended in a slow burning rain. The people below, the loyal gue'la and ignorant civilians alike, were recovering from the shock of the first impact and perhaps looking up at the sky to see what disaster would come next. They saw many more disasters, forty or fifty, each one a massive-calibre shell fired from a broadside cannon on the *Polar Defiance*.

More explosions blossomed across the Chrono-Wrights' District. Some shells fell wide and erupted among the lavish housing around the parliament, or strayed into the Industrial or Clerks' Quarters. How many people died in those moments? The fire caste had calculated the outcome of such a bombardment, but the numbers they came up with had slipped O'Myen's mind. It was unnecessary information, irrelevant, shunted aside to make room for something more important. The lives of the gue'la did not matter. The effect the bombardment would have on the survivors was the crucial knowledge, and O'Myen knew exactly what it would be.

The skyline of the Chrono-Wrights' District was eroding, its cramped hab-blocks and towers collapsing. A spire near the parliament collapsed, taking with it a meaningless number of the city's aristocracy. The cemetery's tombs were lined red and orange with the glare of the fires ripping up from the city.

The sounds reached them, deep rumblings like an earthquake punctuated by

the sudden gunshots of exploding chemical stashes.

‘Where is the beauty in this?’ asked O’Myen.

The functionary beside him turned to answer. ‘In the knowledge of the furtherance of the Greater Good,’ he replied.

O’Myen nodded in agreement, signifying the functionary was correct. These little moments of praise kept the smaller-minded on the right path.

‘And thus we reach the pinnacle of our craft,’ said O’Myen. ‘The blissful stage when all we need to do to see the Greater Good fulfilled, is wait.’

In the hours that passed the bombardment ceased, long after its purpose in wiping out the strongholds of the loyal gue’la was complete, and the fires spread to other parts of the city. Streams of evacuees left the city gates to form miserable makeshift camps in the flinty hills – none of them strayed near the cemetery, for it was a place of ill omen and such things held much weight in the imaginations of a society still not far removed from its tribal roots. The clever ones brought supplies with them to set up shelter and the others crowded around them to absorb better chances of survival. Survivors of the Peacemakers tried to police the evacuees, but they had no hope of keeping the peace here. Opportunists were already stealing and settling scores. Thus were the ways of the gue’la.

A group of humans approached the cemetery. They were tribal elders, among them the elder of the Thundercliff who had spoken to O’Myen many times in preparing this moment. Other leaders were among them, representatives of every ancient tribe of Briseis, guarded by the tribal enforcers who were the true lawkeepers of Port Memnor. They were the leaders of the Endless Sky, the Black Thorns, the Bone Renders and many more, those peoples who had wandered Briseis before they even learned of a long-dead Emperor and his crumbling Imperium.

‘Why have you chosen this place?’ demanded the Bone Render elder. He was a robust and bearded man, who seemed not to need the protection of the warriors at his side – they carried weapons carved from bone, and he wore the trinkets of tooth and ivory emblematic of his people.

‘We will not be watched here,’ said O’Myen. ‘And as you can see the city is not safe. I have called you together because in their infinite mercy and generosity, the tau wish to extend once more their offer to your people. You have heard the terms already, and they are once more laid before you. It is not much we ask, but in return, we offer you the greatest gift. A place within the Tau Empire, freedom for your people, a future of your own.’

‘It is more to ask than you realise,’ said the elder of the Black Thorns. He was a sickly-looking old man with skin that seemed paper thin. His attendants carried

the implements of his tribe's primitive alchemy – grinding bowls, bundles of rank herbs, jars of insects and leeches. 'To turn back the centuries, to make whole what has so long been broken. Our people live in cities, they kneel before the eagle. Those who keep to the old ways are few. Many will die, alien.'

'Your weak will die,' said Ambassador O'Myen. 'Is that not the way of Briseis? It was the principle on which your tribes were built. It is our principle, too. It is a part of the Greater Good to abandon to their fate those who do not deserve to thrive. And you forget, you will not be alone. The Tau Empire will protect you and watch over you, as it does all who pledge themselves to it.'

'And we will become strong,' said the Thundercliff elder. 'We have been weak for too long. The Imperium has seen to that. One generation is all it will take. We will be hard as the stones and unyielding as the sky.'

'And if you fear for the lives of your people,' said O'Myen, 'then simply observe.' He cast a hand towards the city, the heart of which was spurting clouds of flame and black smoke as it burned. 'The Imperium will have their city, and if it be a ghost town inhabited by none but corpses, they will care not. They would herd every Briseian into the fires. There is no turning back. Throw off their yoke or they will destroy you.'

'I say yes to your offer,' said the elder of the Storm of Shale tribe. 'The Imperium have shown what manner of master they are. I would kneel to the alien a thousand times before I would once before an Imperial altar.'

Other elders gave their assent, a dozen voices raised at once.

'But we once were free!' shouted the elder of the Bone Renders. 'We will but cast off one slavemaster for another! I will lead my tribe to destruction before I lead them to servitude again!'

The Thundercliff elder shuffled forwards to stand face to face with her Bone Render counterpart. The Bone Render was a big man, obviously powerful and physically dangerous, but the frail old woman before him seemed to make him shrink away as if she was the true threat. 'War between the tribes,' she said, 'is a terrible thing. You are charged with keeping the memories of your tribe, so you know it as well as any of us. You speak of leading your people to destruction. Stand before the rest of us, and that is exactly what you will do. Pride keeps you from proclaiming your allegiance to the alien. That is to be expected, for the Bone Renders always were proud. Simply stand in silence, and your will shall be our will.'

The Bone Render tried to meet the old woman's gaze, but his eyes turned to the ground instead. The moment passed, and he stayed silent.

'Then it is agreed,' said the Thundercliff elder. 'None will stand against? None will make war in the name of pride?' There was no answer from the other elders.

‘My gratitude, noble people of Briseis,’ said O’Myen. ‘From the sadness of this day shall come a great celebration, for you are now united with a hundred other species in the embrace of the Greater Good. But there are urgent matters that must be attended to. Have you brought the scouts we requested?’

The Thundercliff elder gestured to her entourage and a dozen men came forward. They wore the colours of several different tribes, hardy souls with pallid and pockmarked skin brought about by spending too much time underground. ‘They have mapped the tombs and tunnels as their fathers did,’ said the Thundercliff elder. ‘None know the underside of Port Memnor as they do. The scouts of the Thundercliff gave you access to the tombs as you requested, and now all tribes have given their expertise there is no corner of the under-city they do not know.’

‘Then I ask that we move immediately,’ said O’Myen. ‘An earth caste work detail waits at the tomb entrance. The rest of you, my fire warriors have prepared a safe place for you so you might be spared the wrath of the Imperials, for more may soon fall on Port Memnor. They want to wipe you out, but the Greater Good values your allegiance and will protect you with our own tau blood.’

The fire warriors gathered the elders up and began marching them off the cemetery grounds, towards a ridge a short distance away where another team of tau troops kept watch. The Bone Render looked back at his burning city, just once, and followed the rest without another word.

The Space Marines met at the landing site, where the shuttles from the *Polar Defiance* had dropped them at the start of the mission. The full Jade Dragons squad was there, barely scratched by their assault on the chambers of Magos Skepteris.

Devynius, on the other hand, was alone.

The Jade Dragons squad was lined up along the ridge when Devynius arrived, standing watch. Sergeant Seanoa was among them, Skepteris’s blood still caking his armoured boot. Devynius limped down the slope as Seanoa’s eyepieces turned to follow him.

Devynius took off his helmet and dropped it at his feet. His power sword followed, and he stood unarmed.

Seanoa stepped out of line and walked to a few paces from Devynius. He unhooked the power couplings on his lightning claw and placed it on the ground. He removed the magazine from his bolter and laid the weapon beside the claw. He took his helmet off as Devynius had done – his face was bull-necked and flat-nosed, with the same swirling patterns on his armour inked across his cheeks and forehead.

Neither man spoke.

Seanoa dropped into a loose guard, hands held up, mobile and feinting. Devynius watched him, unmoving, gauging every detail of the Jade Dragons mobility and fighting style. Seanoa was all power and momentum, built for takedowns and grappling, neutralising an enemy's movement and grinding him into defeat. Devynius had fought a thousand unarmed bouts against his brother Ultramarines on Macragge and he knew just about every style of combat a Space Marine might employ.

Seanoa made a move for Devynius's front leg, not a serious attempt to knock him down but a probing attack to see how Devynius moved. Devynius made the least movement necessary, not giving anything away. Seanoa circled, face focused, making quick half-movements with his hands, trying to draw a false start out of Devynius.

Seanoa knew he would have to move in first, make the first attack. That was why Devynius made the first move instead, darting inside Seanoa's guard with the speed and focus he had learned in decades of sparring and warfare. He drove a fist into Seanoa's breastplate, knocking the Jade Dragon off-balance. He hooked Seanoa's leg with his own, driving an elbow up into Seanoa's jaw and tipping him onto his back.

Seanoa sprawled onto his back in the loose shale. Devynius was on him, driving a fist down at his face. Seanoa caught Devynius's arm in the crook of his elbow and forced Devynius down to the ground. Suddenly the positions were reversed, Seanoa on Devynius's back, wrenching his arm behind him. Devynius felt his injuries, sealed up by the rapidly-clotting blood of a Space Marine, tearing open inside his armour. Hot blood pooled inside his breastplate. Pain rippled up through his chest, met by the cold flood of painkillers dispensed by his armour. They weren't reducing the pain any more, just turning it from an isolated tearing to a dull pulse of agony that went right through him, as if he was immersed in it.

Seanoa wrenched on Devynius's shoulder. The joint was separating. After the encounter with the tau battlesuit force, it wouldn't take much to put Devynius out of action entirely. Seanoa had a dozen ways of beating Devynius now, in a position in which he had a massive advantage. Choke Devynius out. Lock the head and make it clear he could break Devynius's neck at will. Simply pound on Devynius's skull until he fell unconscious.

But there was one way for Devynius to regain the advantage.

Devynius forced his body around under Seanoa's weight, not fighting against the wrenching on his shoulder but using all his leverage to pivot in the same direction. He felt tendons snapping and gristle tearing, just before the flood of

pain blanked everything else out. His shoulder dislocated and the joint of his armour was mobile enough to let the bone swivel freely in its socket.

No longer pinned in place, Devynius spun on his stomach out from beneath Seanoa. Seanoa was still holding his arm but it gave him no purchase on Devynius with the shoulder joint giving no resistance.

Devynius was on his feet, turning to face Seanoa. Devynius raised a foot and brought it down on the back of Seanoa's head. His shoulder separated further, but the pain from the injury was just another note in the cacophony soaring through him. He had felt pain before. A Space Marine had to accept it, to welcome it even, to shunt it to a part of his mind where it could not interfere in the cold business of inflicting harm on the body of an enemy.

Seanoa was face down on the ground. Devynius drove a second axe kick into the Jade Dragons head and Seanoa's face slammed into the shale ground. When he lurched up, his face was cut by the flint shards. He tried to reel Devynius back in by the arm he still had hold of but Devynius dropped knee-first onto the back of Seanoa's neck and pinned him in place.

Devynius drew back the fist of his good arm and hammered it down into the side of Seanoa's face. Pain was bursting through him like fireworks, their glow mingling into a smouldering fire, and it was good – he let it bleed right through him and turn into strength that drove his fist. Bone cracked. Shards of stone clattered against armour. Again and again the fist drove down and each time it hit a more yielding surface, finding fragments of bone instead of a solid skull, torn mush instead of muscle.

Devynius held his fist still, hovering beside his face ready to hammer down again. The side of Seanoa's face was a bloody mess.

A brother did not kill a brother. Seanoa had destroyed the chances of Imperial success on Briseis with his rogue mission to kill Skepteris, but he was still a Space Marine. Devynius could have killed Seanoa there, and both men knew it. Seanoa's squadmates, still watching silently, knew it. That was enough.

Seanoa let go of Devynius's arm. It hung limp and senseless by Devynius's side. Devynius got to his feet and Seanoa lay under him, rolling onto his side and putting a hand to his half-ruined face. Already Seanoa's eye had closed up and the remaining one looked up at Devynius with hatred he did nothing to disguise.

Overhead the shuttle from the *Polar Defiance* was descending, its silhouette edged in the glare from its engines against the black sky. The Jade Dragons stayed where they were as the shuttle came down to land and the ramp opened up. Devynius walked up the ramp alone and the door closed again, leaving the Jade Dragons on the surface and the shuttle lifted off to return to orbit.

Seanoa clambered slowly to his feet. None of his squadmates helped him – it

would be a great shame for Seanoa to show further weakness by accepting the help of a battle-brother now.

Seanoa picked up his helmet and weapons as the squad stood around him, waiting for their next orders. He jammed his helmet back on, hiding his wounded face.

‘As we are hunted,’ said Seanoa thickly, ‘so we hunt. The Black Leviathan is here. And there are still aliens to kill.’

The earth caste work party followed their tribal guides through the tombs, deep down among the ancient fissures and uncovered graves with mouldering bones and shattered statues. These were paths known only to the tribesmen and their elders, mapped by scouts who had paid for the knowledge with their lives. It took many hours to reach the lowermost point, where the warrens through the rocky earth merged with the tectonic margin hidden beneath Port Memnor.

The earth caste surveyors had surmised the existence of this fault from orbit when they first prepared for the war on Agrellan, but reaching it had needed the help of the tribes. The tribes had not been willing to give it. And so O’Myen had been despatched to do his work, and the web had first been spun.

The earth caste workers were squat and powerful, with heavy hands and muscles made for labour. They hauled with them an explosive charge, sometimes on wheels, sometimes lowered by ropes, finally carried on their shoulders like a steel coffin. The guides who led them did not know for sure what it was, but they could guess.

In the infernal heat and the dull glow of the magma-heated rocks, the earth caste detail unloaded the charge and set it with a timer of twelve hours. They wedged it into a fissure in the rocks, a place where the volcanic heat of Briseis’s core met the stony mantle. They made their final checks and the team leader announced their work was done.

The guides were killed with the efficiency on which the earth caste prided itself. Each tau had a pistol concealed in his coveralls and put a single pulse round through the back of each guide’s head. The guides had guessed this, too, for if they were captured alive they might be forced to divulge the location of the bomb and put the whole operation in danger. They did not struggle or complain. They were doing their duty to their tribes, to the family who had raised them and loved them even when the cold hand of the Imperium had tried to crush out all that made the people of Briseis who they were. Better to die here with their work complete than live on another day as chattels of the Imperium.

When the last corpse hit the ground, the tau began the return journey towards the surface. They made good pace, because in twelve hours there would be no

surface to reach.

‘Would that I could see this a thousand times,’ said O’Myen. ‘A million times. So rarely we can observe the Greater Good advanced. It must be a thought, an emotion. But here we can see it, and there is nothing more beautiful.’

The tau observer ship had remained hidden among its camouflage fields and the gravitational disturbances around Briseis. The *Polar Defiance* had missed it entirely. It was not a large craft, just enough to transport O’Myen’s water caste command and the late Vre’Cyr’s fire caste cadre. It was highly advanced, however, far beyond the technology the Imperium could create, and its bridge was a cold, humming testament to the sleek and efficient science of the tau. A section of the viewscreen was zoomed in on the city of Port Memnor, focusing on the huge starport that dominated one side of the city with its enormous rockcrete expanses and scattering of control towers.

‘The fire caste can destroy,’ said O’Myen, the water caste functionalities diligently recording his word. ‘The earth caste can build, and the air caste can take us among the stars. The ethereals can unite us in one glorious whole, a single mind and a single purpose. But only the water caste can bring about such beauty.’

The tectonic charges laid by the earth caste had detonated some time before. The sequence of events, of one land mass moving against another, was as carefully planned as the chain of cause and effect that had seen the Space Marines defeated and the tribes of Briseis broken. Now the sequence reached the surface.

Port Memnor lurched, and the first buildings fell. The burning scars left by the Imperial bombardment blossomed into flame again and the tallest structures toppled – the spires around the parliament, the parliament itself, the towers of the generatorium. A thousand disasters unfolded at once. Those who had not left the city already perished in their thousands. Half the city rose up like a sea monster from an ocean, like the Black Leviathan with which the Jade Dragons were so usefully obsessed. The other half sank as if under an enormous weight.

The fissure opened. A great black slash ripped across the city and hundreds of buildings vanished, crumbling to dust and pitching into the depths. The fissure reached the spaceport and one of the landing pads was torn in half, control buildings falling, explosions erupting where underground fuel tanks were breached.

It took almost an hour to unfold. The fault line under the city opened up and fully half of Port Memnor vanished, the rest devastated more thoroughly than a hundred Imperial bombardments could manage. The spaceport was completely

destroyed, only burning islands of rockcrete remaining between a crazed pattern of crevasses. Ambassador O'Myen watched it all, not speaking or even blinking, as the Greater Good was done before his eyes.

When it was done and only the stubbornly burning fires still moved, O'Myen turned to the gathering assembled at the back of the bridge. The elders of Briseis's tribes had watched in silence, stunned by the enormity of destruction.

'It is done,' said O'Myen. 'You are free members of the Tau Empire. Your people will no longer serve as pawns of the Imperium, serving them to maintain a foothold for their war on Agrellan. You finally have the liberty to seek out the Greater Good. The crew have prepared berths for you on board for the time being, but soon you will rejoin your people and lead them in the old ways again, as nomads and tribes of Briseis, honouring the ancient traditions you preserved for so long. Air caste crew began leading the elders off the bridge, towards the heart of the ship. One did not move, the Bone Render elder, and he stepped forward as the air caste tried to direct him away.

'Speak the truth, alien,' said the Bone Render. 'Will any of us leave this ship?'

Two fire caste warriors stepped in front of O'Myen, pulse carbines in hand. The Bone Render did not argue further, and joined his fellow elders as they were escorted off the bridge.

O'Myen waved a hand and the viewscreen shifted to show the wide view of Briseis, and Agrellan hanging behind it. He was done with this world. A compliance detail would land there soon with water caste social engineers and fire caste enforcers to make something useful out of the displaced peoples of Briseis. That was beneath O'Myen's concern. There were other worlds, other species, on whom to do his work and leave his legacy. Other worlds on which to pursue the Greater Good.

Perhaps, he would even start to believe in it.

HUNTER'S SNARE

Josh Reynolds

CHAPTER ONE

The tau base was not hard to spot, even through the swirling, wind-borne snows, and hidden as it was amongst the harsh-edged crags and white-capped slopes of Rime Crag. It rose out of the snowy rock like a blister, and the peaks it nestled beneath, parasite-like. It was too smooth, too serene for the wilderness it sought to dominate.

In that way, the tau bastion was much like those who had built it. They sought to inflict an unnatural and ill-fitting harmony upon the universe, a universe which was not theirs, not by right of blood or battle, and to force around a manufactured aleph that which had required no centre, or, rather, had many centres to choose from.

They wished to tame the storm. That alone proved them mad at best and monstrous at worst. These thoughts were uppermost in Kor'sarro Khan's mind as his bike hurtled through the driving snow towards the tau bastion, the icy flakes melting against the bare flesh of his scarred cheeks and stinging his golden-hued eyes. He could have worn his helmet, but the thought of even that little amount of constriction upon his senses was anathema to the huntsman, protective photolenses be damned. The air of Agrellan was so toxic that it seared even his altered lungs, but the pain only added spice to the experience. He'd conquered worse worlds than this, poisonous atmosphere and all.

The captain of the Third *Minghan* of the White Scars and the *ordu's* Master of the Hunt leaned into the snow, glorying in its bite as he urged his bike to greater speed. The enemy fortress loomed up, growing larger as he drew nearer. Lights flashed across the top of the outer wall. The enemy had spotted them at last.

Instinctively, he leaned to the side, and his borrowed bike responded with a growl of its engines. Wheels skidded, and the pulse burst seared the air where he'd been a half-second later. More followed, and he guided his steed through the oscillating web of weapons fire with the grace of the *berkut* – one of the

great, golden-feathered eagles which nested in the mountains of Chogoris. To Kor'sarro's eyes, the bursts of energy moved slowly. He did not bother to speak a warning into the subcutaneous vox implant mounted beneath his jaw. Those who travelled in his wake could see as well as he, or he would not have chosen them.

Each was a warrior without parallel, even among a Chapter which was reckoned full of such, and their trophy-racks were as heavy with skulls and scalps as his own. If the Emperor had decided that the lives of some of them must be claimed as the blood-price for a successful hunt, well, so it was, and would ever be.

And this hunt would be successful. He had sworn such, during the Rites of Howling, and had come to the Damocles Gulf, and the hive-world of Agrellan, to see to the keeping of that oath. He would take the head of the alien known as Shadowsun and hang it from his lodge-pole or else he would die in the attempt. Her ugly xenos skull would be added to the White Road, to sit sentry with the rest of the Chapter's enemies. A sudden urgency gripped him. Enthusiasm flushed caution from his veins. It was always the same, when a hunt drew to a close. The feeling of anticipation, the joy of the kill-to-be, roared through him, prodding him on, like spurs in the flesh of balky horse. There was no greater pleasure than this, the culmination of months of patience and focus, the release of the killing stroke across his prey's neck.

He had tracked Shadowsun across Agrellan, from one battlezone to the next, from bunker to trench to bastion, harrying her trail. If he could take her head, the tau would waver. Without her cunning, they would be easy meat. And she was cunning; that she had avoided and outpaced him this long was proof enough of that. He had nearly had her head at Blackshale Ridge. But he had her now. She was cornered, in a trap of her own making. And he would have her head before the sun rose.

'Old man, rattle their paddock,' he growled. Besides the bikes that rode at his heels, his hunting party included a quartet of heavier vehicles: two Rhinos, a Razorback and a Whirlwind, their engines adapted for greater speed so that they might keep up with Kor'sarro's bike-mounted demi-company. Three of the four carried those hunt-brothers who were content to fight on foot, rather than from the back of an iron steed, and the fourth was there to ensure that they could do so with the blessings of the Emperor and the Great Khan.

The comm-bead in his ear squawked as a familiar voice acknowledged the order, and a moment later fire lit the night from somewhere behind him. Old Shatterhand at his appointed task, and unspoken joy, the busting of bunkers and the shattering of bastions. Kor'sarro smiled as the face of his second-in-

command flitted across the surface of his mind. Wrinkled, white-haired Cemakar, whom aspirants and khans of the ordu alike called Old Shatterhand, but never to his face, for even now, old as he was, he had a fist that could fell a Dreadnought and a snarl that could strip the ceremonial unguents from a suit of armour.

Cemakar had refused, and quite pungently, to return with the rest of the company to reinforce Agrellan Prime in the wake of Shadowsun's escape from Blackshale Ridge. Where his khan went, so did he, even if, in his opinion, said khan was a puling whelp of an aspirant, with fewer scars than was healthy and a decided lack of respect for the vaunted wisdom of elders such as the Stormseer Sudabeh and Cemakar himself. Despite this, Kor'sarro was gladdened to have the old man along on the hunt. Too many of those who had stepped forward at his call were like the berkut, bloodthirsty and glory-hungry. As he himself was, even after all this time as Master of the Hunt. Cemakar was a calming presence, and a bulwark against more of the same foolishness which had enabled Shadowsun to squirm out of his grip the last time they'd clashed.

The wall ahead of him disintegrated into burning chunks, some of which splattered across the white-daubed ceramite plates of his power armour. Kor'sarro laughed as more fire split the snow and darkness, and the thunderous cries of the Emperor's hunting eagles boomed across Rime Crag. Let the xenos cower in their burrow for as long as they might; the hunters had come to root them out. He tapped the firing stud for the twin-linked bolters mounted on the front of the bike as he rode through the welcoming flames, to herald his arrival.

Alien weapons opened up as his bike cleared the rubble-strewn opening and slewed about. The flat, disc-shapes of a number of *qarthai* - their gun drones - bobbed into view descending from the walls and rising from the snow that lay like a blanket across the inner courtyard of the bastion. It was an insult that these soulless automatons should be the ones to greet them; one more insult to add to the list of Shadowsun's crimes against the Imperium.

He gunned the bike towards the largest knot of drones and tapped the firing stud again. Several burst apart, struck by the bolter shells. The remainder swooped to meet him, the pulse carbines slung beneath their flat bodies firing without pause. Kor'sarro drew the curved sword sheathed on the side of his bike, activating its powercell, and the long, wide blade was suddenly enveloped in a lethal haze of disruptive energy as he whipped it around and bisected a drone that had drifted too close. The sword was called Moonfang, and like the bike he rode, it was a relic of his Chapter, and possessed a lethal spirit all of its own. The sword had claimed the lives of a thousand of the Emperor's enemies, but it was never sated. The hunter's purr of energy that writhed about the length of the

blade was mirrored in the growl of his steed engines and in his own soul, calling out for battle.

With a roar of joy, Kor'sarro Khan gave in to the call.

Thursk, champion of the Dark Hunters Space Marine Chapter, leapt out into the cacophony of battle with some relief, as *Torguhn's Smile*, the Rhino transport he'd been riding in, rumbled into the bastion courtyard through the breach in its outer wall. He thumbed the activator switch on the power axe in his hand and spun the brutal looking weapon in a lazy arc. He hated being inside the boxy transport. Better to trust his two legs than any rumbling, squalling machine. Though, that said, he didn't mind having a certain thickness of armoured hull-plates between him and the guns of the enemy.

One of the enemy's qarthai raced towards him, spitting death. A number of Khorchin terms had become lodged in his vocabulary like errant kernels trapped between teeth. The language of Chogoris had a rhythm all its own, far different to the crude dialect of Gothic that he and his brothers used for their own battle-cant. It was musical, in its way, and unless your mind and ear were trained to it, it was almost impossible to unravel the full complexity.

Bursts of energy struck his dark-hued power armour, but he ignored them, confident in his armour's ability to absorb the punishment. As the qarthai drew within arm's reach, Thursk swatted it to the ground with a casual swipe of his axe, and then stepped on it, crushing the fragile mechanism easily.

'I hate these things,' he said, his voice becoming a harsh rasp as it was filtered through the respirator vox-grille of his helmet. 'They're more irritating than Phobian nettle-flies.' He looked around, taking in the structure that rose up around him. It was somewhat disorientating, being all swooping curves and rounded edges, rather than the sharp angles he was used to in Imperial fortifications. The tau thought in curves and soft angles, he'd been told, and everything they built was like a bubble atop a trickle of water. The bastion was mostly wall, with a central command centre that was latched to the rocky slope like a splatter of ice. The latter was dotted with a profusion of antenna and receivers.

'But easily dispatched, brother,' a similarly distorted voice said. Thursk glanced sideways at the speaker. Like himself, the warrior was a Space Marine, built for battle and armoured in the Emperor's grace. The other Space Marine was neither khan nor captain. Instead, the blue pauldron and vambrace of his right arm and the crystalline force hood that hung over his bare head, as well as the ornate and highly stylised force staff he clutched tightly in his right hand proclaimed him a Stormseer – a Librarian of the White Scars Chapter, a *zadyin*

arga, a master of lightning, and the spirits of land, air and prophecy. His armour was covered in line upon line of delicate Khorchin characters, so many, in fact, that the white parts were almost grey. A trio of thick, curved knives were attached to his equipment belt, their bejewelled sheaths gleaming in the light cast by the battle. The Stormseer sniffed, patted the knives, and gestured. ‘There’s another one.’

Thursk heard the whine of antigravity motors and spun, chopping the drone in half as it swooped towards them. He turned back. ‘See, Ambaghai? Nettle-flies,’ he said.

‘More like Chogorian wasps,’ Ambaghai said, ‘but I gather your meaning. One stinging insect is much the same as another.’ Thursk knew that the Stormseers were unlike the Codex-trained Librarians of most other Chapters. In any other Chapter, Ambaghai would have been a Codicier – a strategist and advisor. Among the White Scars he served a similar role, his calm counsel keeping Kor’sarro Khan from making a misstep in his hunt, but he was more in the way of a shaman or holy fool. They said he ate ghosts, and spat lightning the same way his superior, Sudabeh, commanded the allegiance of the winds. Thursk had yet to experience either of those things while in Ambaghai’s company, but he looked forward to asking what a ghost tasted like.

Thursk stepped aside as a squad of Space Marines trooped out of the Rhino, their bolters at the ready. They quickly went to work isolating and dispatching the swarms of drones accosting the invaders. The xenos devices weren’t much of a threat without support from living troops, but they could still prove deadly in the right numbers, even to a fully armoured Space Marine. ‘And speaking of stinging insects, Jebe looks as if he’s having fun.’

Thursk glanced in the direction Ambaghai had indicated and snorted in amusement. The company champion of the White Scars Third Company did indeed look as if he were enjoying himself, surrounded as he was by an oscillating ring of gun drones. Jebe was rangy and proud-featured. Like his khan, he disdained the use of a helmet, save when absolutely necessary, and his dark top-knot whipped about him like a halo as he leapt and spun, his sword blocking the gun drones’ shots and deflecting them back at their firers. He had leapt from his bike as soon as he had entered the compound, ready to engage the enemy one-on-one. He moved swiftly, and with a dancer’s grace, though there was a feral lethality to every step of this particular dance. Jebe had fought and beaten his weight in lesser khans for the right to become company champion, a fact he rarely went long without mentioning. He whirled in place, and the last trio of gun drones swarming about him dispatched themselves with his aid.

‘Nicely done,’ Thursk called out. Jebe glanced at him, sniffed, spat and turned

to look for something else to kill. Thursk looked back at Ambaghai. 'I don't think he likes me.'

'He doesn't,' the Stormseer said. Thursk didn't bother to ask why. He knew the reason well enough. Like Jebe, he was a company champion, of his own chapter's Fourth Company. Jebe, for whatever reason, took that as an insult to his prowess. There was a competitive streak in the warrior that grated on Thursk's nerves.

'And what about you?' the Dark Hunter asked, leaning his axe across his shoulder. Jebe wasn't the only one who was unhappy with his presence. At a loss for what to do with him, Kor'sarro Khan had made him Ambaghai's designated *keshig*, or bodyguard, for the duration of the hunt. Given the fierce competition among the battle-brothers of the ordu for such an honour, it hadn't engendered any affection for Thursk amongst them.

'I find you off-putting and overly talkative, but not offensive,' Ambaghai said. 'I thought it was a tradition of your Chapter to fight in total silence.'

'Yes, but I'm not fighting right now, am I?' Thursk said. 'Besides which, you White Scars are hardly silent. I'm simply trying to fit in.' He spun his axe again and watched as the White Scars took the base with a speed that would have awed any but a Space Marine. They did not maintain the comm silence that Thursk's own battle-brothers considered a battlefield rule. Jokes, snatches of song and laughter, altogether too much laughter for Thursk's liking, clogged the vox channel, most of it in Khorchin. The White Scars did not care if the enemy overheard their jocularity, given that no enemy yet had managed to translate their native tongue, that they knew of.

Thursk had never particularly enjoyed the quiet, but the White Scars seemed to revel in noise, be it singing, talking, or merely the cry of the wind or the growl of engines; just one more difference between the Founding Chapter and their Successor. But there were similarities as well. The Chogorian way of life wasn't wholly alien to a Phobian. And it was those connections which the White Scars insisted on exploring, in order to ensure that their Successors kept to the proper way of things. 'That is why I'm here, after all. It's the Dark Hunters turn to kneel at the trophy-rack, and swear fealty to the Khan-of-Khans,' he said. Once every cycle, the White Scars Successor Chapters met, and pitted their chosen champions against each other in the Rite of Blooding. The winner was sent to join the White Scars for a full cycle, to learn all that the Founders had to teach them.

'It's not about fealty, cousin,' Ambaghai said. 'It is about tradition. The traditions of Chogoris, of the steppes and wild, thunder-struck hills, of the plains wind and wild-fire that are in your blood, whether you are Chogorian or

Phobian, whether you are a brother of the Storm Lords, the Marauders, or the Solar Hawks. We are all sons of Jaghatai, and it was his decree that all those who share his blood know the traditions of the world which bore him in fire, blood and glory.’ Ambaghai tapped the head of his staff against the Imperial aquila on Thursk’s chestplate. ‘We are many tribes, gathered beneath a single horse-tail banner, and we all ride the White Road together, guided by his wisdom, so that our blades may shed blood as one.’

‘Do you rehearse that speech, or does such poetry flow naturally from your lips?’ Thursk asked. He watched as the White Scars who’d been aboard the same Rhino as himself moved quickly towards the entryway of the xenos bastion, while their bike-mounted brethren herded and harried the remaining gundrones to a safe distance for ease of dispatch. Another squad had disembarked from the second Rhino, the *Tulwar of Shibani*, and moved to join the first. The Wheel and the Spoke... that was what they called it. Those mounted, the Wheel, drove the enemy back and kept them running, while those on foot, the Spoke, set up a temporary hard point which the bikes could retreat to, if necessary, or, as in this case, took an objective while the enemy was distracted. It was, as with all of the Chapter’s tactics, simple enough at first glance, but became more complex the longer you studied it, with dozens of moving parts working towards a central goal in perfect harmony.

‘You see? Off-putting,’ Ambaghai said. ‘Even Vayren wasn’t so frustrating, when he was with us, and the Storm Lords have as much appreciation for poetry as they do for orks.’ Thursk watched as Jebe joined the squads at the entryway, and felt a brief flicker of envy. The champion barked an order. One of the White Scars produced the round canister shape of a melta bomb. He tossed it to Jebe, who caught it, activated the grav-clamp on the bomb’s canister and slapped it against the doors. The entryway exploded a moment later, and the two squads entered the bastion, Jebe in the lead.

‘Vayren can barely speak Gothic, let alone comprehend poetry,’ Thursk said. He had fought alongside the champion of the Storm Lords Third Company during the Siege of Vhot. He’d been impressed by Vayren’s single-minded murderousness, if not his personality. ‘I once saw him head-butt an ork to death, and *without* his helmet.’ He settled his axe in the crook of his arm. Above and behind him, the storm bolters mounted on the cupola of the Rhino added to the cacophony, as they blew a swarm of gun drones from the air. There weren’t many drones left, and those that remained seemed confused and easy prey for the bikers. ‘Have you noticed a distinct lack of enemy presence here, or is this usual for the – what do you call them?’

‘*Khamar* – it means “noseless”, and no,’ Ambaghai said.

‘No to which?’ Thursk said. He stepped aside as a spinning smoking gun drone struck the side of the Rhino and exploded. Fragments of metal struck his armour and fell to the ground.

‘Jebe has secured the bastion,’ Kor’sarro Khan said as his bike slewed to a halt before them, scattering grit and snow. ‘I would have you by my side when I pierce the beast’s heart, Stormseer.’ After a brief hesitation, he added, ‘and you as well, cousin. I would see how the Dark Hunters earned their name.’

‘It would be an honour, my khan,’ Thursk said.

Kor’sarro gazed at him for a moment, and then nodded tersely. ‘Ambaghai, call the lightning and clear the air,’ he said, gesturing to the remaining gun drones, which continued to hover and fire at the White Scars. ‘I grow tired of sparring with these toys.’

‘I never thought you’d ask,’ Ambaghai said. He gripped his staff in both hands and held it up. The air took on a sharp, metallic odour and seemed to congeal for a moment, as if every molecule of oxygen and water had suddenly contracted. Then Ambaghai stabbed the ground with the butt of his staff, and the air was filled with azure strands of electricity, which arced from drone to drone, frying the sensitive circuitry of each one in turn. The remaining drones in the courtyard fell to the ground, their hulls charred black.

‘Impressive,’ Thursk said.

‘Yes. Consider that, the next time you insult my poetry,’ Ambaghai said, tapping the Dark Hunter’s shoulder plate with the tip of his staff.

‘Duly noted, Stormseer,’ Thursk said.

Kor’sarro led the way into the alien bastion, as was his right as Master of the Hunt. Ambaghai followed, in his shadow as ever, and off to the side, the Dark Hunter. He did not know what to make of the Phobian yet. He did not ride, nor did he seem to understand their way of war. He might as well have been a scion of Russ or Dorn, for all the kinship Kor’sarro felt with him. He reflected, not for the first time, on the Great Khan’s insistence that they welcome these strangers in all but blood into their tents and war councils. He understood the reasoning for it, but that didn’t make it any easier to take.

Jebe felt the same way, and took no pains to hide it. ‘What is he doing here?’ he said, as Kor’sarro approached. If the Dark Hunter noticed the rancour in his tone, he gave no sign of it, which only fuelled Jebe’s dislike, if Kor’sarro were any judge. The Dark Hunter used silence as a weapon, deflecting and antagonising in equal measure with his obtuse refusal to speak to any but those he absolutely had to. He just watched, and listened and it was getting on everyone’s nerves. Then, given that he could barely speak Khorchin, that might

have been a blessing.

‘If he is not here, how will he learn?’ Kor’sarro said, stepping past the champion. He had no time for Jebe’s petulance. Not now. The explosion that had allowed them ingress had blackened the entry chamber, warping the walls and causing the floor to bubble and buckle. Ruptured power conduits dangled from the ceiling, spitting and crackling, and the strange, flat glow-panels the xenos used for illumination had cracked and gone dark. The whole place stank of tau. The sloping walls and soft curves did not offend his senses as much as they might once have, however. There was much to learn from an enemy’s architecture, as there was from their art and language. To properly stalk prey, one had to learn how said prey’s mind worked. And the best way to do that was to study how they built their lairs. Orks constructed crude but sturdy structures, where the hrud burrowed in like mites and the tau... the tau changed the landscape to suit themselves.

‘Status, Toguz,’ he said, looking at one of the Space Marines who stood near the bulkhead that led into the heart of the base, their bolters held ready. The way into the command centre was open. It was all very inviting, like meat dragged beneath the nose of a beast of prey.

‘No hostile contact, my khan,’ the warrior said. ‘Not even any alarms.’

‘The internal defences were offline as well,’ Jebe said, quietly. ‘It was as if they expected us to get in.’

‘Odd,’ Kor’sarro said. Unease filled him. This wasn’t the first empty base they had attacked, but this one was different. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to make it look as if it were occupied. The others had had automatic defences, but nothing like what they’d encountered outside. *Bait for the beast*, he thought again.

‘Unlikely is what it is,’ a new voice said.

Kor’sarro didn’t turn. ‘Is that a warrior’s considered wisdom, or merely the grumblings of an unappreciated elder?’ he asked.

Cemakar grunted. He stumped into the entry chamber, his helmet tucked under his arm. His top-knot and moustaches were as white as the snow outside, and his skin was the colour of leather, making the scars on his cheeks stand out all the more. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘are they here or not?’ His armour was of an older mark, and studded with rivets. The chestplate was covered in ceremonial embossment, depicting scenes from ancient victories of the ordu. The battleplate had been worn on a thousand battlefields, even before it had been gifted to Cemakar. Like the warrior who wore it, it was a relic of the ordu.

Kor’sarro frowned and stepped through the interior bulkhead, one palm resting on Moonfang’s pommel. Even sheathed, the sword vibrated slightly, as if

it couldn't wait to be free once more. If he had his way, that would be soon. Though not, apparently, soon enough. The lack of resistance nagged at him. All of the intelligence they had gathered had pointed to Rime Crag as where Shadowsun would be, but here they were, and she was nowhere to be seen. Had his enemy already fled? Or had she never been here in the first place? Was this another distraction? She was good at that, he was forced to admit. She thought in layers, something a Chogorian could respect, even if she was a xenos witch.

Shadowsun was more dangerous than his fellow commanders in the defence of Agrellan had wanted to admit. Patriarch Tybalt's dismissal he understood; it offended the old Knight Commander to imagine that a mere alien could threaten his forces. Straken, the commander of the Catachan regiment deployed to Agrellan, was a different matter; he'd faced the tau before and knew better. Shadowsun was the lynchpin, the central mind of the tau strategy. That was why he had left the defence of Agrellan to Tybalt, Straken and Sudabeh, and set himself the goal of taking her head. Without her, the xenos would falter.

The problem was she knew that as well as he did. And thus far, she had refused all attempts to bring her to battle, after the encounter at Blackshale Ridge. Including now, it seemed. He gave a grunt of frustration and looked around. The command centre was online, but empty of life. A holographic projection of Agrellan as seen from orbit floated over a wide, flat dais, and the circumference of the room was dominated by the computer consoles and view-screens that lined the walls. The latter had been gutted. The only light in the room came from the hologram.

Kor'sarro swept a hand through the hologram of Agrellan, and the image wavered and changed, from an orbital perspective to a sub-stratospheric view. Symbols that he didn't recognise were clustered about Rime Crag. He touched one, and the image changed again. He blinked in surprise as he recognised a pict-capture of his face. A red circle, far too much like a targeting icon for his liking, surrounded the image of him.

'We should have brought the Khwarezmian,' Cemakar said, looking around. 'He has a way with these xenos toys.' Kor'sarro smiled at the thought of the commander of his reserve force. Gharchai the Khwarezmian, whose folk had not been steppe-riders as Kor'sarro's clan had been – indeed, as most White Scars clans had been – but instead the armoured hill-men of the Khwarzm, who thundered to war not on beasts built for speed, but for strength. Of all the diverse tribes and clans of Chogoris, the Khwarzm had held out the longest against the armies united by the Khan-of-Khans, and had bought their freedom first, earning it in iron and fire. Gharchai was a true son of the Khwarzm, built like a thunderbolt and with a mind like water. He was the opposite, in many ways, of

Old Shatterhand.

‘Gharchai is more useful where he is,’ Kor’sarro murmured, still examining the hologram. The Khwarezmian and his Land Speeders had been deployed to sweep the basin craters to the south and east of Rime Crag, in order to test the tau defences there. They were due to rejoin the main force in twelve hours, but could be recalled sooner, if necessary.

He and his hunt-brothers had harried the tau across Agrellan, striking hard and fading away before the xenos could mount more than a token resistance. They had made great wounds in the invaders’ infrastructure, opening their lines and forcing them to regroup and delay their stratagems. But for every bunker destroyed and every communications array silenced, the enemy seemed to have three more at peak operation by the time the White Scars had returned to the hunt. The gaps they had created in the front lines of the enemy had long since closed behind them, he knew, even as he knew that they were being drawn deeper into tau-controlled territory. Shadowsun had led them on a merry chase, but this night should have seen the end of it. So where was she?

Kor’sarro considered ordering his men to sweep the base again, but discarded the thought before it reached his lips. He already knew that they would find nothing. The base was running on auxiliary power, and it had been stripped of everything of value. It had been abandoned, but pains had been taken to hide that fact. The alien mind was a mystery, and their tactics and strategies seemed bereft of meaning, even to one who had fought them as often as he had. But he knew enough to know that just because a thing looked one way, did not make it so. He straightened. ‘The base is empty, but it was made to look occupied, to draw us in. Why?’

‘I see only two reasons for a ploy such as this,’ Cemakar said. He looked at Kor’sarro. ‘I’m sure you do as well.’ He hiked a thumb at Jebe. ‘Even he sees them.’

‘What?’ Jebe said.

‘It’s a distraction,’ Thursk said. It was the first time the Dark Hunter had spoken since they had entered the base. He tapped the hologram dais with his axe.

Kor’sarro nodded. ‘Or a trap,’ he growled. As soon as he said the word, he felt it, and cursed himself for not recognising it sooner. He had been too focused, too intent on his prey not to see the trap she was leading him into. Rime Crag could simply have been a diversion, to pull the White Scars out of response range for a planned assault, and thus deprive the Imperial forces of an asset. But that was no more Shadowsun’s way than it was his own. She was not an ork; the witch could *think*. The tau had the advantage of mobility, an advantage he and his huntsmen

negated, or at least countered. They were too dangerous to the tau to be left riding free. The conclusion was reached and the decision made in micro-seconds. 'To your vehicles. We must ride. Cemakar, alert the Khwarezmian. We'll need support.'

He led them out of the command centre, and hurried back towards the courtyard. Even as he stepped out into the cold night air, he knew he had been too slow. The trap had been sprung, and its jaws had already snapped closed. It happened fast. The snowy air blurred above the courtyard, and his ears caught the hum of alien technology, offensive and smooth.

'Take cover,' he roared, but too late. A White Scar was flung backwards from his idling bike, his cuirass melted to slag, and superheated blood issuing from the grille on the front of his helmet in a burst of red-tinted steam. Kor'sarro cursed.

To their credit, the others reacted in the millisecond between their brother's death and his collapse, swinging off their bikes and pulling the heavy machines over to act as improvised cover as they fell flat upon the snowy ground.

Strange, hunched shapes flickered in and out of view through the gaps in the wall, stalking towards the bastion. Kor'sarro could hear the familiar, waspish hum of tau weapons being readied to fire. Kor'sarro swung back around the edge of the ruptured bulkhead and drew his bolt pistol. 'Ambush,' he said, looking at the others.

'Good,' Jebe said, drawing his blade. 'I was getting tired of killing machines.'

CHAPTER TWO

‘Communications are jammed,’ Cemakar said, finger pressed to his ear. He looked at Kor’sarro, his features grim. ‘They’ve lured us in and wedged the door shut. We’re trapped.’

‘Then we’ll just have to pry it open, won’t we?’ Kor’sarro said, as Cemakar’s words sunk in. Before he could say anything further, the whine of anti-grav units pierced the air. A trio of gun drones shot over the parapet of the wall, and sped through the air over the courtyard. But these weren’t the annoyances they’d faced earlier. Instead, each of the new drones had a long, blocky rifle-shaped weapon slung beneath its disc-shaped body.

As Kor’sarro watched, one of the drones rotated and fired. A White Scar went limp as the shot struck him in the head and punched through his helmet with apparent ease. The remaining White Scars hunkered down behind their bikes and began to return fire, and the drones swooped upwards and vanished into the falling snow. Another trio swooped into position as the first vanished, coming from the opposite direction. Their long-barrelled weapons fired, chewing the courtyard, and throwing dust and steam from the melted snow into the air.

‘They’re keeping us pinned down,’ Thursk said. ‘If we go out there, we’re as good as dead.’ Kor’sarro was pleased that there was no trace of fear in the Dark Hunter’s voice. It was merely a statement of fact. He hadn’t been eager to have the newcomer in his hunt, but there were other things to consider than his own preferences. Inter-Chapter relations must be maintained. The sons of Chogoris could not be allowed to forget the ways that had made them strong, ways that had carried them to the stars and beyond, no matter how diluted their blood. Perhaps he was a true son of Chogoris after all.

‘A child could see that, Phobian,’ Jebe snarled. ‘The question is what do we do about it?’ The storm bolters atop the Rhinos opened fire, but their efforts to track the swiftly moving drones were in vain. Bolt shells struck the bastion and

stitched a line up the walls, pursuing the second group of drones as they too vanished into the snowy darkness. Silence fell, but only for a moment. The two groups of drones returned, flight-paths interweaving as they plummeted downwards like angry wasps.

‘We do what we always do. We act,’ Kor’sarro said. He glanced at Cemakar. ‘I recognise that type of qarthai. They have controllers. Keep their heads down.’ Cemakar barked an order into the vox and in the courtyard, the Whirlwind and Razorback gave vent to furious bellows of indignation, shattering the night with contrails of fire. The weapons of both vehicles oscillated in a slow arc, firing at nothing in particular, but simply filling the air with death.

The drones faltered, if only for a moment. But a moment was all that Kor’sarro required. He stepped out into the courtyard, bolt pistol levelled. Coolly, he fired, and one of the drones was knocked from the air. The remaining five focused their attentions on him, weapons rotating towards him. ‘Ambaghai,’ he said.

‘Make room, brothers,’ the Stormseer said, stepping out into the open. Lightning crackled around him, curling the length of his staff and ionising the air around him. Snow melted beneath his armoured feet, becoming steam as he filled the air with snapping, writhing serpents of lightning. The drones shuddered as they were ensnared in the coils of electricity. Ambaghai’s eyes began to glow, and, face tight with strain, he said, ‘I see them.’ He pointed with his staff, and Cemakar spat an order.

The Whirlwind’s missile rack rotated in the direction Ambaghai had indicated and disgorged its remaining payload at the rocky escarpment above. The darkness was washed away in a blaze of light as the Vengeance missiles hammered the ridge. Snow and rock tumbled down from the point of impact to strike the bastion, causing the structure to shudder around them. As one, the drones tumbled from the sky, striking the ground, smoke rising from them. Cemakar kicked one aside as he stomped towards the Whirlwind, shouting, ‘Reload! Castellans, by the Khan, or I’ll have your topknots for my trophy rack.’ He swung himself up onto one of the Rhinos and swatted the Space Marine in the cupola on the top of his helmet. ‘Get back down there, Ojai or I swear by the Star-Horse I’ll kick your teeth in,’ he snarled.

Kor’sarro watched him, bemused, and then turned and dropped his fist on Ambaghai’s shoulder plate. ‘Good trick, Stormseer,’ he said. ‘I just wanted you to fry the drones.’

Ambaghai ran his fingers through his wispy beard and gave it a satisfied flick. ‘The xenos were watching us through the eyes of those drones. I decided to return the favour.’ He tapped the side of his head. ‘For one who can speak to the

lightning, following the signal between device and controller was easy enough.'

'Congratulate yourself later, those were just the preliminaries,' Cemakar said.

Sitting in the cupola of *Tulwar of Shiban*, he hammered on the top of the hull with the flat of his hand and the Rhino wedged itself hull-first into the largest gap in the wall, effectively blocking it. There was enough room for him to swivel the storm bolter and he let off a burst at something out past the wall.

'Hostiles incoming, multiple points,' he said. Past the Rhino, Kor'sarro caught a glimpse of flickering, indistinct shapes. They were *sirguma*, he realised, the 'sneaky ones', what some Imperial reports called 'Stealth suits'. They raced past the gap in the outer wall, burst cannons whirring. They weren't trying to get in, he knew. They were merely keeping the White Scars heads down. Delaying tactics, even the sniper drones. But why were they being delayed?

Kor'sarro boosted himself up onto the Rhino and crouched in the gap beside Cemakar. His keen eyes picked out the flat hammer-headed shapes of several tau troop transports, gliding over the snow. They weren't in any hurry, by the looks of them. They might as well have been out for an evening ride. Then, it wasn't like their enemies were going anywhere, was it? He shook his head, disgusted with himself. *Of course*, he thought sourly, *you are a cunning one, witch*. Shadowsun had used their speed against them. She'd laid a bait trail, and he'd fallen for it like an over-eager aspirant. 'Snares within snares,' he muttered. 'I've led us into a trap.'

'Looks like they came ready to fight,' Cemakar grunted, not looking at him.

'Good. I intend to give them one. If you can manage to pry yourself out of that cupola, I'd like your counsel,' Kor'sarro said. Without waiting for a reply, he slid off the Rhino and dropped lightly to the ground. Cemakar followed him, grunting and cursing as he hauled himself out of the Rhino's turret, likely with some assistance from the crew. Kor'sarro strode back towards the command centre, rattling off orders as he went, and the White Scars moved to obey quickly. Most took up positions around the gaps in the walls, ready to repel an assault. Others picked up the bodies of their slain brothers and carried the corpses to one of the Rhinos. Kor'sarro would leave none of their dead on this alien-defiled ridge, if he could help it. Additionally, he wanted the enemy to have as little knowledge of their remaining numbers as possible. Information was as deadly as a bolt-round, in the right circumstances.

'Ambaghai, Jebe, and...' he trailed off, motioning to the Dark Hunter.

'Cousin,' he said, finally 'we have time, and we must make use of it. Come.'

Inside the command centre, he waited for them to file in and tapped the hologram. As he'd expected, the map of Agrellan was replaced by a three-dimensional cutaway image of Rime Crag. The bastion was illuminated, as were

markers representing the forces now approaching it. 'Nice of them to leave us a picture so we could see just how badly we're caught,' Cemakar grumbled.

'They taunt us,' Jebe said. Kor'sarro had come to much the same conclusion, after wondering whether it was an oversight. What he knew of the tau had never suggested a sense of humour, but then, even orks taunted their foes. Shadowsun wanted him to know she'd caught him. He could almost admire that sort of bravado, if it weren't so infuriating and, more importantly, aimed at him.

'Wouldn't you?' Thursk said. 'We're the enemy. Would you have them fete us, and throw a feast in our honour?'

Jebe glared at the Dark Hunter and made to reply, but Kor'sarro gestured sharply, cutting him off. 'Taunt or oversight, this is our situation. Suggestions,' he said.

'Tortoise,' Cemakar said promptly. 'We seal this bastion and wait for the Khwarezmian to seek us out, jammed frequencies be damned. He'll rip from the belly, and we'll smash their snouts on our shell.'

'Eagle,' Jebe countered. The champion stabbed the hologram with a finger. 'We punch through their lines before they have a chance to cut us off. We swoop out of jamming range and contact Gharchai. Then we ravage them as we move, and take them apart before they can pin us down again. That is the White Scars way. Leave shell-games to the sons of Dorn.'

Kor'sarro's eyes narrowed as he studied the hologram. Silently he meditated on the advantages and repercussions of both stratagems. He knew which he preferred, but preference was not always wisdom. His eyes flickered to meet Ambaghai's. The Stormseer met his gaze placidly. If Cemakar were a rock, and Jebe a bird of prey, then Ambaghai was a storm, implacable and impossible to predict. The Stormseer's mouth quirked in what might have been a smile and Kor'sarro raised an eyebrow. 'What is it?' he said.

Ambaghai reached into one of the many pouches that dangled from his equipment belt and retrieved a handful of something, which he scattered across the hologram dais. Finger-bones, Kor'sarro realised, from an ork or some unlucky heretic. Ambaghai was said to collect them himself, with one of the ceremonial knives sheathed at his waist, after every battle. He made special effort to claim the fingers of witches and psykers, for they channelled the will of the spirits more easily. Each length of bone was covered in delicately carved Khorchin characters, and each represented a symbol from the Chogorian zodiac. Ambaghai raised his hand, and the finger-bones rose like domino tiles, standing at attention. He made a circular gesture, and they rattled and fell, making a strange pattern.

'What do the spirits say?' Cemakar asked.

‘The spirits say why does it have to be one way or the other? Why not both at once?’ Ambaghai said. ‘There is no one true path, my khan. There are only potentialities, stories yet untold and horizons yet unseen. Which story we tell, and which horizon we seek is up to us, and we are free to do as we wish,’ he said and looked at Jebe. ‘We strike the enemy from as many directions as possible. We give them more targets than they can handle, and carve them up at our leisure. *That* is the White Scars way.’ Jebe glowered at the Stormseer but said nothing.

‘What do the spirits say of Shadowsun?’ asked Kor’sarro, softly.

Ambaghai looked at him, his face unreadable. Then he twitched his fingers, and the bones rattled. ‘She is here, my khan. Close, watching, waiting,’ he said. He met Kor’sarro’s gaze and added, ‘But you already knew that. You are the Master of the Hunt for good reason, my khan. Even the spirits defer to your tracking expertise. If you have brought us here, trap or no, here is where we should be.’

Kor’sarro stroked his moustaches with the side of his thumb, thinking. Ambaghai’s words had heartened him, but the tactic the seer had recommended would divide his forces even more than they currently already were. But if the enemy were counting on them hunkering down, it might throw them into disarray. And if they were counting on the White Scars to make a break-out attempt, leaving behind a force to hold the bastion might force the enemy to split their own forces in ways that they hadn’t planned for.

He gazed at the hologram, trying to discern the nature of the ruse he faced. He was not, by nature, a strategist. There were other khans for whom the subtleties of the great game were as meat and drink, men for whom war was nothing more than a game of Go writ large. They thought in terms of ploys and feints. For Kor’sarro, however, war was an art. Every battlefield a canvas, every drop of spilled blood a brushstroke. Watching a battle unfold was like watching an image appear. The trick was to see what the image was before it was completed, and to ensure that the picture you had was the one you wanted. He touched the hologram, considering. To hesitate, either way, was to be lost. The Emperor frowned on vacillators and the over-cautious.

‘Ambaghai is correct,’ he said, decision made. ‘The enemy seek to deny us our advantage, to limit our mobility by pinning us here. Those out there are merely the hand on our throat, but the blade will be descending soon enough.’ He looked around the room. ‘Wheel-and-spoke, my brothers. Cemakar, you and Jebe will be the wheel. Ambaghai, you and I shall be the spoke.’ He looked at Cemakar, who was already making as if to argue. ‘You will punch a hole through the tau lines with our armour, and half the bikes. Take Hasik. He’s our best rider,

and he's outrun the tau more than once. Don't stop until you make contact with Gharchai.' He looked at Ambaghai. 'And we will hold the tau's attention here. If that becomes untenable, we shall ride out after you.'

'We've got a load of Castellans in the Whirlwind ready to fire,' Cemakar said, begrudgingly. 'That will buy us some time. But mark me, when they come, it'll be with those blasted two-legged tanks of theirs.' The others in the room growled or muttered at the mention of the enemy *aburgma* - the battlesuits. Such constructs were the bane of any battlefield, their destructive potential rivalled only by that of the Imperial Knights.

Kor'sarro smiled. 'I'm counting on it.'

'This is the most powerful weapon in the universe,' Thursk hefted his axe and spun it in a tight figure eight as he followed Ambaghai out of the command centre. 'Axes can topple empires. They kill kings, daemons and monsters. On Phobian, axes are passed down from father to daughter, mother to son. This is the axe my mother used, and her father before her. She gave it to me, the day I was chosen to become a god of war. And though it has changed, as I have changed, it is still my axe.' He glanced at Ambaghai. 'Do you understand, Chogorian?'

'Yes,' Ambaghai said. He smiled. 'However, your axe is here, and the enemy is, as yet, over there.' He gestured at the outer wall. 'Hence my question: would you like a bolter, cousin? Bok will not mind.' He extended the bolter towards Thursk again. He was holding two, both claimed from the White Scars who'd fallen earlier.

Thursk took the weapon. 'Sorry,' he said. 'Which one was Bok?' He checked the clip.

'The dead one,' Ambaghai said. He looked away.

Thursk looked at him, and then back at the bolter in his hands. It was an ornate thing, lovingly edged in brass and silver, with a dragon's head embossed on the barrel. An iron ring, heavy with the teeth of orks, had been attached to the grip, which was plated with bone, likely taken from the same orks who'd provided the teeth. 'On Phobian, we left the bodies of the dead for the bats,' he said.

'We did the same on Chogoris. Save we left them for the great eagles.'

Ambaghai sniffed. 'Or we burned them.'

'Fire attracted the bats,' Thursk said.

'I can see where that would be a difficulty,' Ambaghai said. 'Were they big, these bats?'

'Fairly,' Thursk said. 'They ate horses.'

‘I’m given to understand there are large wolves on Fenris,’ Ambaghai said, after a moment. ‘They eat men, or so the Space Wolves claim.’

Thursk made a rude sound. ‘Wolves,’ he said.

‘The sons of Russ are quite particular about their wolves,’ Ambaghai said. But he smiled as he said it. Thursk chuckled.

‘By the by, that was enlightening, back there,’ he said. The Stormseer looked at him, and the Dark Hunter held up a hand. ‘No mockery intended, I assure you,’ he said. ‘Among my brothers, command is not so fluid. One voice speaks, and all others listen.’

‘That has never been our way,’ Ambaghai said, somewhat chidingly, Thursk thought. ‘Even the great Jaghatai did not move without seeking council with his sub-khans. Men are not machines, cousin. They are not inclined to move in unison, or to act as one. A wise khan gives equal weight to every subordinate. He does not hesitate, but he considers, and then makes his decision accordingly, as every man must decide for himself to follow that decision. They must move as the spirit wills.’

‘By which you mean, they listen to you,’ Thursk said.

‘Of course,’ Ambaghai said, ‘Wasn’t that what I said? I speak for the spirits, after all.’ He spread his arms and sucked in a lungful of the harsh, cold air. ‘This is the best time, cousin. This is the right place for us. The battle’s red edge is our tent, our battle-brothers, our kinsmen, and the haze of war is our meat and drink.’

‘Did your spirits whisper that to you?’

‘Don’t they whisper the same to you?’ Ambaghai said, tugging on his beard with a flick of his wrist. ‘Other Chapters merely wage war, cousin. The White Scars *are* war. We are the crash, the noise, the thunder. We are the confusion, and the madness and the inevitable end. We are the Star-Hunt. Where we ride, worlds die.’

‘One side, Phobian,’ Jebe said, brushing past Thursk, before the latter could reply. ‘Some of us have aliens to kill.’ The champion bounded out of the command centre, a spring in his step and a feral, childlike grin on his face.

‘He looks cheerful,’ Thursk said.

‘Of course he’s cheerful. He’s going to get to kill something,’ Cemakar grunted, joining Thursk and Ambaghai. Cemakar looked at the Stormseer. ‘Guard him well, Stormseer,’ he said. His face wrinkled up, as if he were uncomfortable saying the words.

‘Always,’ Ambaghai said. He inclined his head. Cemakar nodded tersely and stumped away. Thursk watched Cemakar follow Jebe towards the Razorback. Kor’sarro’s second in command barked orders with rapidity, gesticulating about him for emphasis. Of the two squads of White Scars that had ridden in the

Rhino, one was staying behind, while the other was splitting its strength between the two Rhinos, both of which would be providing the muscle for the breakout attempt. The squad who'd come in the Razorback was staying behind as well. The transports were all but useless in the bastion, save as improvised barricades, and Kor'sarro had other plans for the defence of the place.

While their commanders conferred, the White Scars had dragged rubble into position to create a series of zigzag strongpoints close to the command centre. As he watched, one of the White Scars used a meltagun to sear several sections of stone together into a crude bulwark. Thursk realised that they had no plan to block the hole in the wall, and immediately grasped the implication. The tau had a number of troops with the capability of entering the bastion by air, if they so wished, making the wall all but useless for defensive purposes. But those troops that couldn't fly would be drawn to the gaping hole in the defences as their easiest point of ingress. The makeshift strongpoints were arranged in such a way so as to catch the inevitable assault in a killing field. It was a brutally efficient means of utilising their surroundings, and Thursk couldn't help but be impressed. His own battle-brothers would have ignored the wall, but held the gap, leaving the courtyard empty, so as to draw in the flyers for dispatch.

But that was the White Scars way, as he was coming to learn. They fought efficiently, utilising the least amount of effort for the maximum gain. It was the predator's way, not the warrior's. Bait and switch, induce and gut, bleed the enemy as much as possible before landing the killing blow. The tau fought in a similar manner, and he wondered whether Kor'sarro or Ambaghai had noticed. He refrained from mentioning it, for fear of giving insult. The White Scars weren't as touchy as some of their Successors, but they could be oddly defensive when their way of war was called into question.

He moved out into the courtyard, taking it all in. The Rhinos were stripped of everything that wasn't necessary for the assault. In the field, the White Scars used their transports as mobile armouries, loading them up with anything they might require, so that they only rarely had to stop and resupply. Frag and krak grenades, replacement storm bolters, and packs of ammunition were brought into the entryway of the command centre, which had been converted into a temporary armoury. The bikes were stowed behind the strongpoints, for easy access. The courtyard was soon filled with the growl of engines, as the transports readied themselves for departure. Once a decision was made, the White Scars acted on it quickly.

The white-armoured Space Marines moved briskly, and more than one sang softly to themselves as they worked. They spoke to each other, joked and laughed, and the sense of camaraderie amongst the Star-Hunt was obvious. A

hand settled on his shoulder. Thursk turned, expecting to see Ambaghai. Instead, Kor'sarro Khan stood behind him.

'If you would go, now is the time, cousin,' he said.

Thursk hesitated. 'Go?'

'With Jebe and Cemakar,' Kor'sarro said. 'If I were in your place, I would not wish to be trapped here. And you are not under my command. You are here to observe, and learn, and if you would see us at our best, you must see us at the attack.'

Thursk looked at him. 'In the Dellrond Campaign, my battle-brothers and I held the entrance to the Cathedral of the Emperor Ossified for five years against the greenskins,' he said. He slung the bolter Ambaghai had given him over his shoulder. 'By the end, we were using their bones as clubs.' Kor'sarro said nothing. Thursk took that as an invitation to continue. 'I am here to learn of your traditions, and see how you wage war, to learn the ways of Chogoris, and to show fealty to the Khan-of-Khans.' He hefted his axe. 'But this here, in this place, is how a Phobian wages war. Ambaghai said that the White Scars are war itself. If that is true, so too are the Dark Hunters, and I would show you that a son of Phobian can stand at the red edge as well as a son of Chogoris.' He extended his axe. 'And if I must fall where I stand to show you that, it is a small price to pay.'

Kor'sarro smiled. He laughed, grabbed Thursk's helmeted head in both hands and brought their heads together. 'Show me, brother. And then after, perhaps I will teach you to ride, hey?' He released Thursk and stepped back. 'Come, brother. We have blood to shed, for the Great Khan and the Emperor.'

Kor'sarro turned away from the Dark Hunter and raised his hands. The noise-level in the courtyard dimmed instantly. Outside the walls, he could hear the gathering storm. The xenos were readying themselves for their first assault. It would be artillery first, he knew. That was their way, and he did not begrudge them it. He looked around. 'Go, and laugh while you kill,' was all he said. The engines of the transports roared, and his men cheered.

He unholstered his bolt pistol and trotted towards the wall. The Dark Hunter fell in beside him and Ambaghai as well. They, along with the remaining battle-brothers, would cover Cemakar's assault. A Space Marine stalked past him, hefting one of the extra heavy bolters, loops of ammunition curling about him. The warrior caught his eye and patted the heavy weapon. 'Honour of first blood, my khan,' he asked. His tone was hopeful.

'By all means, sing them a song of death, Godi,' Kor'sarro said, recognising the White Scar. 'Make it loud, and tuneful, eh?'

‘I’ll make it something cheerful as well, shall I, my khan?’ Godi said.

Kor’sarro laughed and gestured to the wall. The Rhino that had been blocking it revved up, and pulled back, dislodging loose bits. Godi stepped into the breach and the heavy bolter roared. Without slowing his rate of fire, the White Scar stepped sideways, out of the breach. Another White Scar, carrying the second of the two replacement heavy bolters, followed suit, stepping out into the open, and then shuffling out of the path of the vehicles behind him. Spent shells dropped steaming to the snow from the feed-boxes of the heavy bolters.

Past them, Kor’sarro saw camouflaged vehicles rising over the snow, weapons glowing with pale energy. Tau fire warriors, clad in white armour, hurled themselves to the ground, seeking cover. They’d been moving into position to make an assault, as he suspected. He wondered, idly, why they were called fire warriors. He dismissed the thought with a shake of his head. There would be time for such thoughts later, once the enemy was defeated.

The vehicles visible behind the fire warriors were mostly transports, but there was one bunker-buster, armed with the strongest energy weapons the aliens possessed, a Hammerhead, he thought it was called. *Even when they’re being sneaky, they’re predictable*, Kor’sarro thought. The tau forces were as dogmatic in their way as the warriors of Ultramar. That was both their strength, and their weakness. He slapped the hull of the Razorback. ‘Ride, brothers, ride and ravage!’

As if in reply, the Razorback’s twin-linked heavy bolters roared, adding to the noise. Its driver gunned the engine and sent it rumbling forward out through the breach. Behind it, the Whirlwind fired a barrage of Castellans, littering the ground to either side of the breach with explosive mines. The Rhinos followed the Whirlwind, breaking to either side of the latter as they cleared the gap in order to cover it while it reloaded. The Rhinos’ storm bolters added their voices to the Razorback’s heavy bolters and the air was filled with scything death. Tau warriors died, torn apart by the explosive bolts. One of their transport vehicles slewed awkwardly aside and smashed up against the escarpment, exploding in a ball of fire. The flickering shapes which had sought to keep the White Scars pinned down revealed themselves as they fired at the transports.

Kor’sarro gestured. ‘There, the sirguma!’ he roared. He’d been hoping they’d reveal themselves, if only long enough for the White Scars to teach them the price for doing so. Godi pivoted at his khan’s command, and the heavy bolter in his hands roared in harmony with the storm bolter from one of the Rhinos. The weird, bulky, insectile shapes of the armoured tau twitched and jerked as they were caught in the crossfire. Three of them fell, their armour sparking and hissing as it collapsed into mangled ruin. The others sped away, their forms

blurring and vanishing in the still-falling snow that swirled thickly on the air.

The four vehicles ploughed through the tau lines, the Razorback's reinforced hull smashing aside a tau transport in a crash of metal. The tau were not swift to react, seemingly stunned by the sudden assault. Kor'sarro hesitated, wondering if they should press the attack, but the moment passed. The air was split by the whistle of turbines. Heavy shapes dropped down through the snow, and the ground shook with the impact. The hulking shapes of the enemy battlesuits advanced slowly through the whirling snow. At the sight of them, the tau fire warriors seemed to gather their courage, and they began to advance, their pulse rifles snapping.

'Back inside, brothers,' Kor'sarro said quietly, trusting in the vox-circuit to carry his words despite the noise of the advancing tau troops. 'It's time to bait the xenos into a trap of our own.'

CHAPTER THREE

‘Reload! I want incendiaries to cover our flanks. Heat disrupts the xenos targeting scanners. Set this whole blasted ridge on fire if you have to,’ Cemakar roared into his comm-unit. Around him, the air was filled with the thrum of the powerful engines of the *Hunter’s Stroke*. Other than the crew, he and Jebe were the only passengers aboard the Razorback. His augmented hearing could pick up every grind of the treads and every squeal of the armoured plates flexing. Even the company’s Techmarines didn’t have Old Shatterhand’s ear for ailing pistons and fraying filters.

He grinned to himself, but was careful not to let it show on his face. The children thought he didn’t know about their name for him. He flexed his hand, feeling the pull of old wounds beneath the white ceramite. He had almost lost it once, pulling a screaming, puling wet thing out of the corrupted chassis of one of the nightmare engines of the Great Enemy. He had torn the chassis open and plunged his hand through the acidic bile that had filled it, even as the engine had tried to scissor him in half with its battle-claw. It had been a necessity, at the time. Now it was a story, to be passed around the fire. Such was the way of it.

Jebe grunted in disgust and Cemakar dropped his hand. ‘We shouldn’t be disrupting them. We should be attacking them,’ he said. ‘I thought we were fighting, old man.’ The champion crouched awkwardly in his seat, his sword across his knees. Why he didn’t just sheath the damn thing, Cemakar didn’t know. Nor did he bother to ask. The only thing more worthless than Jebe’s opinion was... well, there wasn’t really anything more worthless than that.

‘We are fighting them, or did you not notice the gunfire?’ Cemakar spat. He paused to glare at the champion. Cemakar had seen a hundred warriors take up the company’s honour for their own, and of that hundred, Jebe was easily the most annoying. He was the youngest to hold that position since Kor’sarro himself, and his trophy-pole was overbalanced with skulls and scalps. He saw a

mulish glint flare in the champion's eyes.

'That's not what I meant,' Jebe said, 'We left the khan. We should not have done that!'

'No, we shouldn't have,' Cemakar said. 'But he is khan. And we have our task. Let us try and accomplish it with what grace we may.' He looked hard at the champion. 'Withdraw, and then return. That is our way. Strike, ride and strike again.' He turned and hammered on the reinforced turret, where the Razorback's gunner was busy firing at the tau that had pursued them. They'd managed to pull roughly half of the tau force in their wake. Everything that could keep up with them had come after them. That lessened the pressure on the khan, but it was going to make contacting Gharchai almost impossible. 'Keep the khamar from getting too close to *Yesugei's Teeth*, Mongke, or I'll have your topknot,' he said, referring to the Whirlwind. They needed the battle tank in one piece and functional. He turned and made his way to the driver's compartment. 'What's waiting for us,' he said, leaning through the hatch.

'Our sensors and communications are still jammed,' the driver said. 'We're charging blind.' He paused, and then added, 'Not that that's anything new.'

'So long as we keep charging,' Cemakar grunted, dropping a hand on the Space Marine's helmet and giving it a shake. 'Don't stop, Tolui. Our khan's life depends on our speed.'

'Speed I can give you. Just don't ask me to get us there in one piece,' Tolui said. Cemakar could hear the grin in his voice, even though his features were hidden beneath his helmet. He nodded, pleased. It was good that Tolui was cheerful. War was a craft, and a craftsman must take pleasure in his work, else why do it?

As Cemakar slipped back into the passenger compartment, the comm-bead in his ear crackled. 'Report,' he said.

'*We've – ost conta – ith* Tulwar,' a voice spat. The urgency of the words carried through the hiss of static, if not the words themselves. Cemakar cursed. The vehicles had limited contact, thanks to the tau jamming signal. There could be any number of reasons they'd lost contact. If the Rhino had drifted too far behind the others, even by just a few metres, the signal could have succumbed to the interference.

'Get that damn hatch open,' he shouted back at the crew compartment.

'Which one?' Tolui called back.

'Which one, he says. The one I'm staring at, you horse's knuckle,' Cemakar snarled. He snatched up his bolter and stomped towards the Razorback's rear hatch. Jebe was on his feet and a half pace behind. Cemakar thrust a finger at him without stopping. 'You, stay.'

‘But– ’ Jebe began.

‘My Razorback, my rules,’ Cemakar snapped. ‘Is everyone going to argue with me today?’ He didn’t bother waiting for a reply. Instead he hurried to the rear hatch. He checked the bolter’s clip as he moved. The pneumatics that controlled the hatch hissed as it opened wide, letting in the cold and snow. Cemakar grabbed a dangling equipment strap and stepped to the edge, his eyes narrowed against the glare of the moonlight on the snow.

They had reached the narrowest point of Rime Crag, where the rocky ground thinned to a barely passable lip, just above a snow-encrusted slope. The slope itself was an undulating ribbon of rock that stretched down into one of the many basin valleys that now dotted the poisonous surface of the hive world. The basins were in actuality immense, kilometres-across impact craters, souvenirs of an Inquisition sanctioned Exterminatus at some point in Agrellan’s history. Cemakar inhaled the poisonous air, snorted and spat a goblet of acidic spittle. The planet was a death-trap. The tau would have ignored it, and rightly, if it hadn’t occupied the sector of space it did. It was a key world. To take the Damocles Gulf the xenos had to take Agrellan.

Yesugei’s Teeth was just behind them, its missile pods swivelling as it sought out targets. Bikes roared past, jinking in and out of the line. Behind the Whirlwind, one of the Rhinos trundled along, a White Scar in the cupola, his hands on the grips of the storm bolter. Overhead, the roar of the Razorback’s heavy bolters had faded, leaving behind only the grinding grumble of the treads rolling over rock and snow. The tau vehicles which had been harrying them had fallen back. Cemakar grunted. He hadn’t expected that. He craned his neck, trying to spot the second Rhino. Had they fallen behind, or...? Dark thoughts flickered across the surface of his mind, stirring from cynical recesses of a mind hardened in the ways of war.

The explosion, when it came, was not a surprise so much as an unwelcome confirmation of his suspicions. He saw a flaming chunk of wreckage slide down the slope far behind them. He knew instantly that the warriors aboard *Tulwar* were as good as dead, whether they had been in the Rhino or not. He cursed. The tau had been prepared for a breakout. *No wonder they didn’t put up much in the way of resistance*, he thought. He considered ordering the bikes to check for survivors, and then dismissed the thought. They had their task, and he’d be damned if he’d let a few filthy khamar prevent them from accomplishing it. He tapped the bead in his ear. ‘Hasik,’ he growled. Static hissed in his ear as he tried to make contact with the leader of the bikes. He cursed and pushed on, on the off chance Hasik was receiving him, ‘Hasik, keep going, whatever happens to us. Make contact with Gharchai. That is your only duty.’

He began to order the Whirlwind to collapse the ridge shelf behind them, in order to stall whatever the tau had unleashed, when flickering shapes landed onto the battle tank from above. The Stealth suits crawled over the top of the tank, and they fired at him. Cemakar bellowed in fury as projectiles ricocheted throughout the Razorback's interior. He let loose a burst with his bolter and slammed a fist repeatedly against the top of the hatch. 'Mongke, you blind bovid-brained...' he began. He faltered as a white-armoured body tumbled down onto the lowered lip of the hatch, and splashed blood across his feet. Mongke, he realised, as the kroot swung down into the Razorback. There were five of the alien mercenaries. They were covered in patchy white fur over their rubbery hide and their skull spines rattled as they came for him with raucous shrieks.

The kroot wore heavy harnesses – rappelling gear, he thought – and carried thick, serrated blades. They had likely been lurking on the crags above and pounced as soon as the Razorback passed beneath. 'Jebe!' he roared, smashing the first of them aside with his bolter. The kroot spun away and out of the open hatch, but the others paid it no heed. They slammed into him, knocking him off his feet. Ugly, veined air sacs decorated their wattle throats, and pulsed wetly as the creatures' breath rasped in their lungs. The xenos cannibals had the ability to adapt to their surroundings, he knew. These had obviously figured out a way to survive in Agrellan's virus bomb-ravaged environment.

Their blades scored his armour as he wrestled with them. He was heavier and stronger, but they had the advantage of numbers and a raw ferocity that would have put an ork to shame. He'd lost his bolter in the fall, and he clawed for the combat knife sheathed on his hip as he grabbed a snapping beak that had darted for his face. Three of the kroot scrambled off him and started towards the front of the Razorback. Cemakar had no time to shout another warning. His attacker's blade slid between his shoulder plate and gorget, tearing through the carapace to dig into the tough flesh beneath. He left off trying to grab his knife and instead grabbed the kroot's avian skull in both hands and jerked it towards him. Their skulls connected with an audible thump and the kroot reared back in surprise and pain.

Cemakar grappled with it, and they rolled down the lowered hatch, bumping over Mongke's limp body. He drove a fist into its side, and was rewarded by the snap of bones. The kroot shrilled and slashed at him. He caught its wrist and drove his palm up into an oddly-jointed elbow, shattering the joint. Then, with a jerk, he drove the creature's own blade into its throat. He booted the body off the ramp, and it was swiftly ground under the Whirlwind's treads.

He grunted in satisfaction and looked up. The Stealth suits were too busy to notice him. They were preoccupied firing at the Rhino's gunner, who was trying

to draw a bead on the creatures with his storm bolter without damaging the Whirlwind. He turned to reclaim his bolter, and he nearly slammed face-to-beak with a kroot. Startled, he nearly toppled from the ramp, but regained his balance. The kroot tumbled past him, trailing blood.

‘Is that all of them?’ Jebe asked. The champion was covered in blood, none of it his. Cemakar wondered how he’d managed to employ his sword in the close confines of the Razorback. He gestured back towards the Whirlwind.

‘Stowaways,’ he rasped, grabbing hold of Mongke and dragging him up the ramp and back into the Razorback. Jebe reached out a hand and helped him. ‘*Tulwar* is gone. Orchai is going to need some help. Grab my – what in the nine hells are you doing?’

‘Helping,’ Jebe said, stalking out onto the ramp, sword in hand. Without a backwards glance, he gathered himself and leapt, clearing the distance between the Razorback’s ramp and the Whirlwind’s front hull. He slammed into the latter and scrambled up. As he reached the top, his blade seemed to spin in his hands and a Stealth suit exploded and tumbled away in a cloud of smoke and snow, cloven from hip to shoulder. The remaining two turned, and Jebe charged towards them. His blade licked out, peeling an armour-plate from one, and the force of the blow sent the tau spinning from the Whirlwind. The tau tried to activate its jetpack, but too late as it struck a rocky outcropping and vanished.

The remaining xenos fired, and Jebe leapt from the top of the Whirlwind. He caught hold of the side hatch, and dangled for a moment, trying to right himself. The remaining sirguma crouched on the edge of the roof and took aim, but before it could fire, the storm bolter on the Rhino roared and the tau vanished in a burst of blood, smoke and mangled armour. Jebe laughed as it fell past him and vanished down the slope.

Before Cemakar could do more than shake his head in disbelief, the face of the ridge behind the Rhino bulged outward suddenly. Cemakar’s eyes widened as the massive battlesuit tore its way out of the concealed alcove that had been carved into the curve of the ridge and ploughed through the snow behind the Rhino. It was bigger than any other battlesuit he’d had the bad fortune to encounter, at least twice the height of the others, and roughly the same size as the Imperial Knights. He watched as the massive construct hurled the camouflaged tarpaulin that had hidden its alcove aside and raced for the Rhino, snow billowing in its wake. It was fast, too fast for its size. ‘To your rear,’ he roared, ‘look to your rear!’

The Space Marine in the Rhino’s cupola tensed, and began to turn, but too late. The battlesuit was on the transport a moment later, grabbing its rear. The engine stuttered as the Rhino’s treads lost their grip on the ground. Cemakar

could only gape as the Rhino was upended and sent crashing down on top of the Whirlwind. The latter's missile pod exploded in gouts of flame, as missiles exploded or fired automatically and the force of it flung Cemakar backwards into the Razorback. Flames filled the loading bay, obscuring the fate of the battle tank and Jebe both. He coughed and groped his way to his feet, half-blind and mostly deaf. He staggered towards the crew compartment.

'Tolui, have you made contact with the Khwarezmian yet?' he croaked. He peered out through the view-slit. He could see the shapes of the bikes, or what he hoped were the bikes, hurtling far ahead. Hasik had got his message – or he was seizing the initiative. Either way, the message would get through.

'No,' the driver said tersely. 'Mongke?' he asked.

'Dead,' Cemakar said. 'We're the last, besides Hasik and his riders. Keep us moving. Don't stop. Whatever you do, don't stop...' he trailed off as the ridge face in front of them bulged, and a second battlesuit burst into view, blocking their path. He leaned forward. 'Ram it!'

Tolui complied, but Cemakar knew that it was too little, too late. The battlesuit levelled its weapon, and fired.

'Here they come,' Kor'sarro said. He stood amidst the improvised strongpoints, in full view of the gap. Moonfang was planted in the ground before him, his palms resting on the pommel. Godi and the other designated heavy bolter gunner had retreated behind cover as soon as they'd re-entered the bastion at his command. He was Master of the Hunt, and the honour of drawing their prey in fell to him.

Kor'sarro watched the white-armoured forms of the fire warriors creep forward in silence. They moved with inhuman precision, more like a flock of birds or a herd of horses than men. Snow crunched beneath their feet as they came, and he could smell the odd, briney tang of their blood on the air. The mines the barrage of Castellans had laid had done their work. The only path of assault that remained to the tau was through the breach in the wall.

The assault had begun as the snow had slackened. He recalled from the briefings he'd only half-listened to that inclement weather played havoc with the tau sensors, and camouflage technology. They'd fired at the walls and the rocky escarpment that rose over it, dropping snow and rock on the bastion. All of it was intended to drive the White Scars back from the walls, to force them to seek cover in smaller and smaller holes. It was a simple enough plan and cunning, for all that it ignored that speed was not simply a matter of space.

Behind the fire warriors, the Hammerhead had ceased its barrage. He could hear the whine of the approaching battlesuits, and smell the searing stink of the

energies used by the tau weapons. The fire warriors would seek to push them back, and keep them pinned in one spot, easy meat for the battlesuits. On top of the walls, hazy shapes flickered and moved, their presence revealed by the drifting snow. Red dots suddenly appeared on his chest, bobbing across the aquila before veering off to seek out other prey. 'Ambaghai,' he sub-vocalised.

'I see them, my khan,' the Stormseer said. The Stealth suits were there only to keep them boxed in, Kor'sarro thought. He could have been wrong, but he doubted it. They likely had orders not to engage, unless absolutely necessary.

'Can you call the storm?' he asked. The tau had reached the gap in the wall. His lips peeled back from his teeth in a fierce smile. *Come on, just a few steps farther*, he thought.

'The spirits of this world are dull-witted and the winds stubborn, but I think I can convince the snows to fall,' Ambaghai said. Kor'sarro could hear the strain in the Stormseer's voice, even through the fuzz of the static that afflicted the vox-channel thanks to the tau jamming frequencies. He was asking much of Ambaghai, but they needed any advantage they could get. When the assault failed, the tau would likely move straight to trying to tear the bastion apart around them. When that happened, they might have to move, Khwarezmian or no, and the snow would be as good a distraction as they could hope for.

'Take your time,' Kor'sarro said. 'They owe us for Bok and Jochi. I would have them pay their debt soonest, and at once.' The fire warriors had cleared the breach. If they noticed the way the rubble had been cleared, and situated, they gave no sign. Perhaps they saw but did not understand. Perhaps they understood, but came on regardless. Kor'sarro thought it was the latter, and bowed his head. Brave prey was the best prey. Then, he clasped Moonfang by its hilt and jerked the softly humming blade from the ground in a spray of snow and stone.

He glided forward, palm flat on Moonfang's pommel, the tip of the blade angled down. The tau had stopped, unprepared for an assault by a single warrior. Kor'sarro gave a bark of laughter. As if in slow motion, the pulse rifles swung towards him, and he heard the rough sibilants of the tau language crackle through the air. His laugh grew, spearing out ahead of him, like the shadow of a swooping eagle.

Alien fingers twitched on triggers, but slow, too slow. Moonfang's pommel rolled beneath his palm and the blade arced up. His grip loosened and the blade scythed out. A fire warrior lost its head, and blood sprayed across the front of its comrades' helmets. Kor'sarro was among them a moment later. Moonfang spun in his grip, and the machine-spirit within the power sword pulsed fiercely as it tasted xenos blood. He lopped off limbs and heads, shattered weapons and cracked armour.

Waste no movement, Kor'sarro thought. His elbow caught a fire warrior in the chest, crushing the delicate bones beneath the armour, as he pulled Moonfang across a throat. He whirled and chopped through the barrel of a pulse rifle. *Do not bother with flourish or flair, concentrate on the principle, complete the canvas in as many strokes as it takes, no more, no less*, he thought, leaning back as a short barrelled pulse carbine cracked. He felt the heat of the shot as it passed past him and the world sped up as he hunched forward, pivoted and drove Moonfang through the shooter's chest hard enough to lift the tau off its feet and nail it to the wall. He jerked the blade free and stepped back, arms spread, xenos blood dripping from his armour and sword.

He gazed at the fire warrior teams that had stopped just before the wall. Their advance had faltered in the face of his attack on the first team through the breach. Arms still spread he stepped back, as if inviting them in to his tent. The snow had begun to fall more heavily, and the wind stirred what had already fallen, rousing it into undulating flurries. Kor'sarro smiled and lowered his arms. Ambaghai had done as promised. He planted Moonfang into the ground in front of him. He made a beckoning gesture and said, 'Well, who's next?'

Thursk shook his head as he watched Kor'sarro trot back behind cover, his path peppered with a fusillade from the advancing fire warriors. The khan had his sword resting on his shoulder, and paid no attention to the shots that sizzled through the air about him. A White Scar handed him a bolter and he nodded agreeably, sheathing his blade.

'He's mad,' Thursk said, as he returned fire.

'No, he is an artist,' Ambaghai said. The Stormseer sat on the ground, beside Thursk, his hands on his staff and his head bowed. His voice was tight with strain, and his eyes glowed with an eerie blue light. 'A sculptor, who shapes violence the way the men of Qo-Chin shaped clay to make the fluted tea-bowls so prized by that folk.' As he spoke, the snow flurries grew more savage, and the wind whipped through the courtyard with a shriek.

Thursk did not reply. He utilised the bolter with the precision that had been drilled into him during the stand at the Cathedral of the Emperor Ossified, one shot, one kill. Any more was waste, and in a situation like this, waste was as much an enemy as the one in front of you. The fire warriors moved swiftly, but they had nowhere to go. The White Scars had created a killing ground, and convinced the tau to walk obligingly into it. Nonetheless, the xenos seemed determined to make a fight of it.

Orks would have simply charged, and died in waves. But the tau warriors were smarter than that. The fire warrior teams leap-frogged past one another,

first one team moving, and then the next, each one covering the other as best they could. More drones buzzed over them, absorbing some of the punishment meant for the fire warriors in a splash of crackling energy. Shield drones, Thursk realised.

Pulse bursts scarred the improvised barricade he crouched behind, but he ignored the dust and flinders of stone which spattered across his helmet. One of the White Scars was singing. Others took the song up, and the sound of it seemed to affect the tau as badly as the bolter shells that tore the life from their fellows. The fire warriors began to fall back, some attempting to drag their wounded with them. Thursk saw something out of the corner of his eye and slid around.

Burst cannon roared and the White Scar nearest him staggered. Thursk lunged to his feet, grabbed the wounded Space Marine and flung him to the ground behind him. Through the eddying snow, he saw the shape of a Stealth suit crouched on the strongpoint, cannon whirring, with smoke rising from the barrel. Two more suits raced across the tops of the strongpoints, seeking to cover the fire warriors' retreat. They attacked and hopped away, seeking to divert rather than kill.

He swung his bolter up towards the one closest to him, and a gun drone smashed into him, knocking the weapon from his hand. Thursk's other hand snapped out, snagging the drone. He yanked it in front of him as the burst cannon spat. The storm of projectiles chewed the drone to pieces and drew sparks from his armour, staggering him. He saw the other Stealth suits closing in. He'd made himself a target. He hurled the smoking, spitting drone at the closest and leapt for his axe, where he'd left it leaning against the strongpoint. He snatched it up as the burst cannon chewed the ground around him.

The wounded White Scar fired at the Stealth suit, drawing its attention. Thursk launched himself at it while it was distracted, and his axe sheared through the barrel of its weapon. It slashed at him with the ruined gun, and he ducked. As it made to leap out of range, he lunged and hooked it with his axe, hauling it forward. The tau inside squalled as he wrapped his arm around the suit's shoulders and drove it headfirst into the wall of the command centre as hard as he could. Metal buckled and the alien voice was stilled. He shoved the dead weight aside and rose, axe ready. The dead alien's comrades had retreated, their jetpacks carrying them back to the wall and then over it. They had accomplished their task, however. The fire warriors had retreated back through the breach.

Thursk hauled the wounded White Scar to his feet and helped him walk to the command centre. The warrior grunted his thanks. Thursk set him down and

rejoined the others outside.

‘They’ve tried the blade, now they’ll use the hammer,’ Kor’sarro said, his voice carrying clearly through the vox-channel. ‘Dig in, and ready yourselves for the storm. They’ll send in their assault troops as soon as the dust has cleared.’ The khan saw Thursk and gestured to him. ‘The Phobian is in command.’ He strode towards Thursk and knocked a knuckle against his aquila. ‘We’ve got some time. They’ll need to regroup, and Ambaghai’s snows will keep them at bay for a little while. I’m going to see if Old Shatterhand has done as he promised. Hold the line, brother.’

‘My khan,’ Thursk said. Kor’sarro nodded and entered the command centre. Thursk looked around at the watching White Scars, and took a steadying breath. ‘Well, you heard him. Dig in. It’s still a long way yet until morning.’

Kor’sarro moved through the darkened base. The comm-bead in his ear sparked and spluttered, and he winced and tapped at it. The local frequencies were still being jammed. He needed to be in amongst his warriors for the vox to work. He’d left a Space Marine named Cholk in the command centre, in an attempt to boost the signal using a spare vox-unit. The White Scars had learned over the centuries of incessant warfare that specialisation was the enemy of effective battlefield operations. Or, so it was, at least, for their sort of operations. Every White Scar had to be an army in and of himself, capable of fixing his own bike, or seeing to his own hurts on the move. The Star-Hunt would not be slowed.

As such, the warriors under his command had picked up their fair share of skills. Cholk knew almost as much about long-range communication as one of the ordu’s own vox-specialists. He hadn’t been happy at being left out of the fight, but sacrifices had to be made for the successful prosecution of a hunt.

Kor’sarro smiled at the thought, but it faded as his nose caught the sharp tang of blood. His hand flew to the hilt of his sword as he stepped into the central chamber of the command centre. Cholk was dead, his armour ripped and torn, the black carapace visible, and the contact nodes exposed and bloody, as if he’d been caught in an explosion, his hand only bare centimetres from his bolter. The vox-unit was smashed. The hologram spun around and around, showing Rime Crag from every angle. He saw markers indicating what he thought were Cemakar and the others, moving along the ridge. More markers, ones he didn’t recognise, closed in, boxing the convoy in. The markers flared and faded.

‘Traps within traps,’ he muttered. It was an artful strategy, taken at a remove. He’d been baited in, and his fangs, claws and scales plucked from him piecemeal, shearing him of his weapons. And it was only part of a greater whole, he knew. That was what made it all so galling.

He'd come to Agrellan, convinced he was the hunter. Instead, he'd become the hunted, and Shadowsun was on his trail, chivvying him along to a point of her choosing. He looked around, senses strained to their utmost. He looked at the hologram again, and saw two markers that were similar. Something about them, about the colour and the crude slashes that designated them, prodded his memory. One marker was on the ridge, and involved in the affray around the convoy. The other was inside the bastion.

His thoughts crystallised. The base hadn't been defended because it was a trap that much was obvious. But there were obvious traps, and more subtle ones. The tau had expected them to hold, or to run, and had planned for either contingency. They knew that it would be difficult to pry the White Scars out, once they'd dug in, and difficult to slow down, once they'd begun to move, but why bother when your goal is the death of one, rather than many?

Metal creaked. Whatever had killed Cholk hadn't been a tau. Too quiet, too vicious... he caught a whiff of an acrid, avian odour and grunted. Shadowsun wanted to bring him to heel, so she'd dispatched the best hunting dogs at her disposal to set their teeth in his legs. While the tau harried, distracted and disorientated, the true hunters struck out at their prey.

'I hear you,' he said, softly. 'I smell you.' He drew his blade slowly. They were all around him, though he hadn't noticed them when he'd entered. They'd masked their odour, somehow, or else had been hiding elsewhere in the bastion. He frowned. He should have ordered a search of the bastion after all.

The first of the kroot came at him from the side. He caught sight of leathery muscles and rattling spines as it sprang for him from out of nowhere, seemingly appearing out of thin air. The kroot squalled as it chopped down at him. He intercepted the blow with Moonfang, and the alien's crude weapon shattered. Before the creature could react, Kor'sarro brought the tip of the blade across its throat as he drew his bolt pistol. As the first kroot fell, he was already firing at the second, which slithered across the wall at him with reptilian speed. The second alien tumbled down, its skull burst by his first shot. But there were more. Blades scissored down, carving gouges in his armour as he whirled. The rubbery hides of the kroot swam with the colours of the command centre as they bled into view, coming at him from all directions, quills rattling. They carried only blades, likely hoping to avoid the attention of the bastion's defenders. They crouched on the hologram dais, clung to the walls and stalked across the floor, croaking and clicking to one another in their debased beast-tongue. Kor'sarro smiled and stepped back, arms spread. 'Come then, beasts. Come to the huntsman.'

The kroot swarmed forward. Kor'sarro backhanded one with his pistol, and

fangs broke and flew as the beast's avian head snapped backwards. He blocked a knife that dug for his gut, and chopped through an exposed neck with Moonfang. Alien blood splashed across the consoles as he pivoted, slashed and spun. His attackers did not retreat, leaping on him with harsh cries. They seemed eager to claim the gift of death, and Kor'sarro could not bring himself to deny them.

As he fought, he marvelled at the complexity of the snare that he had found himself in. Shadowsun had laid traps within traps within traps, paring his forces down, peeling away his weapons and defences, like a hunter isolating a lone bovid from its herd. But there was something he was still missing. So he fought, and in the fighting, found understanding. The answer, when it crystallised, made him laugh out loud. He brought Moonfang down on the skull of the last of the kroot, killing the alien warrior instantly. Then, without a spare glance for the bloody wreckage he left behind him, he strode out of the command centre.

Shadowsun *was* here. For all her cunning, for all her skill, she was still a huntress. And no hunter, however skilled or canny, could resist being in at the kill. Kor'sarro smiled. The night was not yet done, and he had an oath to fulfil.

'I hear you huntress, I hear the sound of your horn. And Kor'sarro Khan is coming!'

CHAPTER FOUR

Jebe rolled onto his face and pushed himself to his knees. His armour was covered in scorch marks and dull grey patches where the colour had been stripped from it by his fall down the slope. He had held onto his sword, despite everything. That was some comfort, though not as much as he'd hoped. The explosion that had consumed the Whirlwind had hurled him down the slope, and he felt every metre of that journey in his limbs and skull.

Snow spun in lazy circles about him, and smoke boiled down off Rime Crag. He used his sword to lever himself to his feet. His power armour had absorbed the brunt of the Whirlwind's demise, but the flesh of his face felt raw, and there was blood on his gorget. The air tasted foul as well, and for a moment, he found himself wishing that he'd worn his helmet.

Angrily, he pushed the thought aside. His khan did not wear one, so the champion would not. That was the way of it. He was the khan's will, the company's will, made manifest. Above him, he heard the whine of servos and pistons, and saw the massive outline of the alien battlesuit move through the smoke and the flames. He could hear the dull boom of bolter fire. Someone was still alive up there, and fighting.

Somewhere below him, snow crunched. Jebe turned. Lightly armoured tau warriors were moving up the slope towards him. Pathfinders, was what the Imperial briefing had called them. He hadn't been listening closely. Jebe didn't see much point in naming something that had been as good as dead the moment it set foot on an Imperial world. The red beams of several markerlights played across his battered armour, and he grimaced. His hand darted for the bolt pistol holstered on his hip, only to find the holster empty, and tattered from the explosion. He didn't waste his breath on a curse. Instead, he whirled and sprinted up the slope. Behind him, the night was lit up with pulse bursts. They struck the slope all around him as he pushed his battered body to its limits. If he could

reach the ridge, the smoke and flame would guard him from being shot down like a dog.

And he'd get to fight something worthy of his blade. His eyes locked on the bulk of the alien battlesuit as it stalked through the smoke and snow. That was prey worthy of the champion of the Third. The smoke enfolded him like a mother's arms.

The ridge was covered in debris. Flames rippled through the air, streaking the night. He could smell spilled blood and oil. Broad shapes flickered eerily through the smoke, like hunting beasts following a scent. They were moving in pursuit of three of his brothers, one of whom was being dragged or carried between them. They fired at their pursuers, but between the snow, the smoke and the shimmering camouflage of the latter, their shots went wild. Jebe lifted his blade to his lips and kissed it lightly. Then he began to hunt the hunters.

They had no idea he was there. They were too intent on the limping, straggling figures ahead of them. When he struck them, it was without warning, and with every ounce of speed he could muster. His sword chopped into metal, as his boot snapped out and up, catching a second xenos in the chest. Armour buckled as the alien fell, and Jebe tore his sword free and sent it slashing out to catch a third hunter in the shoulder. He ducked under the latter's burst cannon as it flailed out at him, and grabbed it as he bobbed to his feet. He reversed his sword and slid it into the hunter's chest as the burst cannon began to fire. He jerked the body around, so that the fusillade caught the remaining hunters.

As the last of them sank down, wreathed in smoke, he ripped his sword free and let the body fall. He looked at his brothers. There were three of them, one supported between the other two. 'Running like whipped curs, brothers? Is that how the warriors of the Star-Hunt act?'

'It is when we're the ones being hunted,' one of the Space Marines said matter-of-factly. 'We were regrouping, with haste.' He had lost his helmet, and the scars on his face stood out against his soot-blackened flesh, as did the gleaming metal campaign studs that lined the side of his skull. He carried a power glaive loosely in his free hand, and by its condition, it had seen much use.

'We do not need to regroup,' Jebe said. 'The *Khagan* once said, "Be the centre of every engagement, and victory will come on wings of smoke and wind."'

'We were being the centre,' the other White Scar said. He jerked his head in the direction they'd been going. He carried a battered bolter, its sling wrapped tight around his forearm. Polished bones and golden bells dangled from cords threaded through holes punched in his gorget. 'We were just going to be it over there, behind cover.'

Jebe made to argue the point, when an energy burst skidded across his

shoulder plate. He whirled about and saw the pathfinders approaching through the flames and smoke. The heavy shape of a large, cylindrical drone floated above them, its weapons oscillating. He looked back at the others. ‘Over there, you say?’

Cemakar bit back a groan as Tolui pried the fang of burnt metal out of his belly. Blood pumped around the wound and then quickly began to coagulate. Cemakar resisted the urge to touch it and said, ‘How bad, boy?’

‘Remember when that genestealer bit you?’

‘Vividly,’ Cemakar said. They were hunkered behind a section of wreckage from the Razorback. Tolui had managed to angle the vehicle at the last moment so that the blast had struck its side, rather than its front, sparing them the worst of it. Even so, the blast had been strong enough to tear the Razorback apart and knock what was left off the ridge and down the slope. Flames crackled nearby, and the falling snow turned to steam before it reached the ground thanks to the heat radiating from the wreckage.

‘Worse than that,’ Tolui said. ‘Do you feel like you’re dying?’

‘I wouldn’t know,’ Cemakar said. He levered himself up onto his elbows. ‘How many survived?’ He could hear bolter fire above them, and the comm-bead in his ear crackled. Someone was still fighting. That meant they had a chance, however slight.

‘Enough to make them wish they’d killed us all, first pass,’ Tolui said. His helm was dented and scorched free of paint, and one of his eye-lenses was cracked. From the smell, Cemakar suspected that the helmet had been melted to his driver’s face. Tolui gave no sign that he was in pain, and Cemakar decided not to ask. Tolui had never been what one could call attractive anyway. ‘I salvaged the portable vox-unit.’ He hefted the boxy communications pack.

‘Good. Keep at it,’ Cemakar grunted, as he grabbed hold of the smouldering wreckage and began to pull himself to his feet. Pain rippled through him, but he pushed it down. Pain was just a reminder that he still had a job to do. When it stopped, well, that was when it stopped mattering. ‘I’ll buy you what grace I can.’

Tolui grabbed him. ‘Given that my legs still work, what say I lead the dance old man?’

‘My legs still work,’ Cemakar spat. ‘Besides, I hate those things. I can never get them to work.’ He gestured plaintively. ‘Give me a bolter, or a knife or... something. Anything,’ he said. He tasted blood and hawked a goblet of something dark onto the ground. Tolui handed him the vox-unit. Cemakar sighed and slid back down. ‘Fine,’ he grunted. He glared at Tolui. ‘If I survive this, I’ll

have your skull mounted on my bike.'

'That's the spirit,' Tolui said. He rose into a crouch. 'I'll be back directly.'

'Take your time,' Cemakar said. 'I'll just beat any enemies who come along to death with this hunk of uselessness.' He patted the vox-unit.

He watched Tolui creep through the smoke and then looked at the vox-unit. It squawked at him and he grimaced. 'Where are you Khwarezmian? Never around when your brothers need you,' he growled. He fumbled with the device, trying to pick up a frequency. They were still being jammed. The tau had done a good job. He leaned his head back, his mind suddenly awash with pain. Space Marines were built to die slowly, by increments, rather than all at once. It was unseemly to go too quickly into the howling dark.

After all, if you died too quickly, the tech-brothers couldn't cram you into one of their boxes. He shuddered slightly, thinking of the Ghost Warriors. Being interred in the sarcophagus of a Dreadnought was at once a high honour, reserved for only the mightiest warriors, and a fate that no White Scar would wish on a brother of the ordu. To never feel the wind or the thrum of engines again was a horrifying thing.

He looked around him, taking in the wreckage. A wave of sadness washed over him. As an aspirant, he had hoped to be called to the harness and hydraulics of the tech-brothers, to commune with the machine-spirits. Instead, he had taken another path. But in his twilight, he had been allowed to move as he wished, and he had become a master of tanks. The purr of the great engines had been his balm and as welcome as the voices of old friends. He had ridden with them into battle after battle; they were as close to him as any hunt-brother. He touched a chunk of twisted metal.

'I am sorry, my friend,' he muttered. He closed his eyes.

When he opened them, a shadow had fallen over him. He looked up. The battlesuit loomed over him, like death incarnate, stinking of spilled fuel and burning metal. How had it got so close without him hearing it? The lens in the centre of its square head whirred and clicked as it focused on him. Cemakar eyed it, and hefted the vox-unit in a considering fashion. Then, with a grunt, he tossed the device aside. He looked up at the battlesuit. 'Well? I haven't got all day,' he said.

The battlesuit raised the cannon-like weapon that occupied its left arm, and he heard the sound of it cycling up to fire. He spat again and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He waited. The construct hesitated, as if listening to some voice only it could hear. It began to lower its weapon. A chill coursed through Cemakar's heart as he caught sight of the slowly advancing tau warriors, moving towards him from below, weapons at the ready. Not death, then, but captivity.

‘Oh that won’t do,’ he muttered, marshalling what remained of his strength. For a White Scar, captivity might as well have been death. If you couldn’t get free, you died in the attempt. He began to push himself to his feet. The tau paused, startled by his sudden movement.

‘Yes, that’s right, I can stand,’ he said, conversationally. His words carried easily through the cold air. ‘No weapons to speak of, and I can taste death, at the back of my throat, but I still stand. I still live.’ He flexed his hands. Beneath his gauntlets, his knuckles popped. He looked up at the battlesuit. ‘There’s a saying, on Chogoris... keep a dying tiger at lance’s length.’ He grinned. ‘You got too close.’ Cemakar leapt, hands outstretched. The battlesuit reacted predictably. It swept out one massive arm, and swatted him from the air, as he’d expected. He was sent tumbling down the slope. Things ground together within him. He caught hold of the ground, digging his fingers in deep, and halted his slide. Everything hurt. But better a quick pain than the long agony of captivity.

He shoved himself up. ‘Once... or twice more... I think,’ he coughed, blood speckling his beard and moustaches. ‘No more than that. I’m an old man, after all.’ He staggered towards the tau, balling his hands into fists. He chuckled, as targeting lights squirmed across his torso. ‘Call the tune, fishbellies. I haven’t got all day.’ Snow swirled around him, momentarily obscuring the enemy. His wounds had opened again, and he could feel blood filling the crannies and crevices of his armour. *This is a good death*, he thought. He had always suspected he would die amongst the burning ruins of his beloved battle tanks.

He had always hoped to die thus.

The snow cleared.

The enemy had not moved. But a new element had been added to the tableau. Jebe crouched on the wreckage, a bandolier of grenades dangling from one hand, and his sword in the other. The champion leapt onto the battlesuit, and swung the bandolier about its head, activating the grenades as he sprang to the ground. He was in amongst the tau a moment later, his first blow shearing through the large drone, and his next dispatching a tau. Jebe moved with the wind, and the edge of his blade was the curve of a crimson whirlwind.

The grenades exploded and the battlesuit teetered, smoke boiling from its orifices. Jebe ignored it, concentrating on the tau. His sword swept out. There was a brutal poetry to Jebe’s war-dance, a sinuous music that was made known in the rasp of steel on flesh, in the crackle of the sword’s powercell, in the dull thunder of explosions, and the screams of the dying. In the moment between sword-strokes, Jebe was the truest heir to the legacy of the Great Khan, and the Star-Hunt personified. No movement was wasted, no wrong step taken. Every gesture was lethal. The air was filled with the foul blood of the xenos, and they

died one by one, barely able to register the strikes which punctured their chests or removed limbs.

Jebe ceased his dance abruptly. Tau fell all around him, dead or dying. He moved towards Cemakar, as the latter sank to his knees, one hand on his side. 'Easy, old man,' Jebe said. 'You will not die this day.'

'Oh, will I not?' Cemakar croaked, 'What a shame. I was looking forward to the rest.' He gestured. 'The big one is still on its feet.'

A missile snarled out of the snow and struck the reeling battlesuit. It toppled backwards with all the grace of a felled tree. The slope shook beneath the impact. Jebe sniffed. 'No it's not.' He hooked Cemakar's arm and guided him to his feet.

Behind him, Cemakar saw Tolui and two others loping forward, cradling weapons scavenged from the wreckage. One of the newcomers had an obviously wounded battle-brother slung over his shoulder. Tolui cradled a missile launcher that had seen better centuries. 'Found them,' he said. He held up the missile launcher. 'And this,' he added.

'So I see,' Cemakar grunted. He looked at Tolui. 'Hasik,' he said.

'No sign of him or his riders,' Tolui said. 'They must have got through.'

'Or they're dead,' Jebe said.

An ear-splitting whine pierced the air, interrupting any reply Cemakar might have made. A second battlesuit crashed to the ground, near the wreck of the first, and unleashed a burst of fire from its cannon. Cemakar shoved Jebe aside and the barrage struck the section of wreckage behind them, sending it pin-wheeling. The White Scars scrambled for cover, firing their weapons. Bolters roared, and the battlesuit advanced towards them through the storm of explosive shells, as if they were no more substantial than the falling snow. The shield on its left arm sparked and shimmered as it absorbed the incoming fire.

It pursued them up the slope, driving them before it. Its burst cannon became a blur of death, filling the air with lethal hornets of explosive energy. Jebe's sword sparked and rang as he blocked several of the shots, and was knocked back several steps for his pains. Cemakar coughed and clawed his way up the slope.

Things were no better on higher ground. Tolui and the others had taken cover amongst the burning wreckage on the ridge. The gutted hulk of the *Yesugei's Teeth* and the Rhino that had been the object of its demise formed a makeshift bulwark. Jebe was the last up the slope. The battlesuit followed them slowly, apparently content to herd them back. Another battlesuit appeared at the other side of the ridge.

'Form up, brothers,' Jebe said. 'Stockade formation, prepare to repel assault,' he added. He took a bolt pistol from one of the others and shoved it into

Cemakar's hands. 'You as well, old man,' he said.

Cemakar checked the clip and looked around. The broad shapes of more hunters, armour shimmering and fading out of sight, trudged forward through the snow. The two battlesuits waited, watching the White Scars with the patience of well-fed predators. They'd beaten the other by catching it off guard. These two were ready, and surrounded by more shield drones. And advancing up the slope were more pathfinders, more drones, and more vehicles. The swiftest forces the xenos had at their disposal, pitted against the riders of Chogoris.

'Keep the army together, I said,' he said. 'Don't go haring off after ghosts, I said. But do they listen? Ha! Do they? Of course they don't. Who listens to the old man? Nobody, that's who,' he growled.

'What are you gnashing your teeth about, old man?' Jebe muttered, not taking his eyes off the enemy.

'The lack of wisdom amongst my peers,' Cemakar grunted.

'What?'

'I said, I wonder what they're waiting for,' he said. 'We're outnumbered, exposed, and bloodied. Why haven't they killed us?'

Jebe glanced at him. The champion made to reply, when the sudden roar of a jet pack washed over them, and a white-armoured form, slimmer and smaller than the other battlesuits, landed on the ridge with a thump. Two shield drones swept around it, and it bore two fusion blasters, one in each hand. Cemakar grunted. He recognised the battlesuit easily enough from the briefings they'd been given before making planet-fall. It was Shadowsun herself, come to watch her enemies die in person.

'Offhand, old man, I'd say that's why,' Jebe said grimly.

The bastion shook, down to its foundations. The ridge trembled with the thunder of alien weaponry. Superheated plasma seared through the cold air, and tore great, smoking craters in the crumbling outer wall. Snow and shale from the upper reaches of the ridge crashed down, filling the courtyard with an icy mist. Ambaghai's snow had proven effective for a few minutes, giving the White Scars a moment's respite, but the tau gunners had compensated more quickly than the White Scars had anticipated.

The White Scars hunkered behind their improvised barricades as the pounding went on and on. One or two of the Space Marines had been hurt, but the barrage wasn't meant to kill them, so much as it was meant to keep them from attacking the tau as they readied themselves for their next assault. Thursk crouched, ready to rise as soon as the thunder ceased. Through the ceramite of his gauntlet, he could feel the ground shiver beneath a heavy tread. 'Here they come,' he said.

He looked over at Ambaghai, where the Stormseer sat, head bowed. Manipulating the winds and snows had taken more out of him than he'd admitted.

'Are you ready, Stormseer?' Thursk said, softly.

'Is anyone ever ready? To wait for readiness is to never move. One can only prepare and seize the moment, when it presents itself,' Ambaghai said, with a tired smile.

'Is that a yes?' Thursk said.

'It's as close as you're getting, cousin,' Ambaghai said.

'Good enough,' Thursk murmured. A moment later, the outer wall shattered like dropped porcelain. Through the smoke and dust of the explosion, heavy shapes plunged into the courtyard, weapons screaming.

A White Scar near Thursk was erased from sight by a blast that eradicated the section of rubble he crouched behind. 'Take them,' he roared, rising to his feet. He grabbed the top of the strongpoint and threw himself over, axe in hand. Fully half of the remaining White Scars followed him, blades in hand. Some wielded power glaives, or swords, but all were armed with hand weapons, rather than bolters. They had ammunition to spare, but the shield drones that accompanied the newcomers would simply soak it up.

Behind them, the rest of the White Scars opened up with everything they had, distracting the drones, as he'd hoped they would. The enemy constructs were annoying, but dumb. They moved to block the incoming fire, and their shield snapped and sparked, lighting up the gloom of the early morning hours. That left only the trio of battlesuits. They were forming the spear-point of a second assault. The xenos were counting on the suits to tear through the Space Marines with the same ease they'd displayed in ripping apart the wall. And, under different circumstances, they might have done so.

But Thursk had fought orks and their war machines, and he knew that the power of such a spear was easily blunted and diverted, if you kept your head and didn't let the size, speed or likelihood of your impending messy demise distract you from it. Admittedly, this was harder than it sounded, but if there was one area where the Dark Hunters excelled, it was in killing things that were bigger, louder, and stronger than them.

On Phobian, the Sahrmatæe people who roamed the moonlit plains of the night-world fought in silence, for to cry out, even in pain, was to attract the attention of the great bats which hunted the skies on silent wings. Normally, the Nokyros preyed on the herds of pale, cannibal horses which roamed the basin plains, but they'd eat a man just as happily, so hunting parties were often formed, to clean out those roosts that were too close to human habitation. The Dark

Hunters took their name from the beasts, and their tactics, swift, silent, and merciless, from the people who hunted them.

Thursk had only ever seen the bats up close once, and that was when he'd been an aspirant, and sent into the black caverns below Phobian's surface with his squad to baptise their axes in the blood of one of the great, savage beasts. That bat, monstrous as it had been, had not worried him as much as the alien battlesuit now loping smoothly towards him. The ground shuddered beneath his feet as it drew close. He set himself, and waited. *Breathe, wait, strike*, he thought. The words had been drilled into his head as an aspirant. *Haste is the enemy of the axe-man. Strike sure, strike hard, strike again*, he thought. The battlesuit closed in, blade snapping out. The air sizzled as it drove towards him. He lunged beneath the blow, augmented muscle propelling him forward smoothly and swiftly. His axe flashed, chopping through piston and cabling.

The battlesuit lumbered past, wheezing and hissing. Smoke boiled out from the point he'd caught with his blow. The battlesuit swung about, eyepiece oscillating and whirring. Its gun swung up, humming. Thursk sprinted towards the wall. Blasts pursued him, ripping up the ground beneath his feet. He leapt. The soles of his boots struck the wall, and he pushed himself off. He flew over the top of the battlesuit as it tried to track him, still firing. His hand snapped out, caught hold of one of the armoured plates that protected the top of the construct. He twisted himself around, driving his boots into the back of the battlesuit. Then, rearing up over the top of it, he let his axe fall, shearing off the square head of the suit.

The head fell to the ground in a flurry of sparks, and he looked down into the pilot-pod, where a blue face, twisted in an alien approximation of surprise, stared up at him. Flipping his axe around, he smashed the haft down on the upraised face, pulping it like rotten fruit. He leapt to the ground as a second suit exploded. The force of the explosion nearly knocked him from his feet, and it was only that half-second without balance that saved him from the energy burst that would have taken his head off. The third suit fought on, with a relentlessness that Thursk could have admired, had it not been trying to kill him.

The battlesuit shrugged off the White Scars who sought to bring it down, trampling one. Its three-toed foot came down with a crunch on the unfortunate warrior's head, bursting it like a dropped melon, helmet and all. A power glaive sizzled as it left a scar on the battlesuit's hull. The battlesuit spun, backhanding the White Scar hard enough to flip him head over heels into the air. The tau swung around, the fusion blaster boiling the air as it fired. Thursk threw himself out of the path of the deadly weapon. He hit the ground and rolled to his feet. Axe in both hands, he launched himself at the xenos, charging towards it.

The pilot of the battlesuit was quicker to react than his comrades. He stepped aside as he swatted Thursk in the back. The blow drove the latter headfirst into a strongpoint. Head pounding, the Dark Hunter tried to stand. His vision blurred. The air hummed as more battlesuits dropped down into the courtyard. The first three had been the tip. The rest were there to make sure it struck home. Thursk groped for his axe.

‘Ambaghai, I need you ready,’ he croaked, pushing himself to his feet. The battlesuit that had struck him loomed over him, weapon glowing. It fired as he dove between its legs. Smoke and heat washed over him. His power armour felt as if it were responding sluggishly. Something in it might have been damaged. Or maybe it was him. He scrambled to his feet. The battlesuit grabbed his head in a grip that would have crushed his skull, had he not been wearing his helmet. It hefted him, and he pounded at its arm helplessly. The metal of his helm began to buckle, and metal cut into his scalp. His eye-lenses burst, peppering his face with photosensitive plastics. The world went red at the edges, and then dark.

Metal shrieked and he fell to the ground. He tore the limp fingers of the severed claw from his head and saw Kor’sarro Khan spring past him. The Master of the Hunt looked as if he had swum through an ocean of alien blood, but he was laughing as he cut the battlesuit’s leg out from under it with one swipe of his powersword, and spun with the blow so that he was facing Thursk. ‘Well done, cousin,’ Kor’sarro said. ‘But the time for the Dark Hunters way has passed, I think. Now, now it is time for the Star-Hunt to ride.’

Behind Kor’sarro, the battlesuit toppled over. His White Scars lunged forward, like hounds at the kill. The Dark Hunter tore off his damaged helmet, revealing the pale features and dark scalplock of his people. Scars marked his cheeks. Not the ritualistic slashes of the White Scars, but the crude marks of close-fighting. ‘I think the tau would argue that point, my khan,’ Thursk said.

Kor’sarro turned. The newly arrived battlesuits moved forward, weapons flaring and roaring, sending White Scars scrambling for cover. He moved, still smiling, to face them. They had held their position long enough. He knew his enemy’s mind now, and that alone was worth the inconvenience and indignity of the trap he’d been led into. ‘Stormseer,’ he said, not loudly. His words carried regardless, and he knew Ambaghai had heard him.

‘My khan,’ Ambaghai said. He stepped out from behind the strongpoint, his staff hugged to his chest. He took a deep breath, and the air was suddenly charged with electricity. ‘Command me, my khan.’ Kor’sarro could hear the faint hint of exhaustion playing about the edge of the Stormseer’s words.

‘Shake the heavens and scour the earth,’ Kor’sarro said. He swept Moonfang

through the air. ‘Show them the power of our storm.’

‘Gladly,’ Ambaghai growled. He raised his staff, and the air contracted about the ancient relic. It was said that the staves gifted to those brothers who showed an affinity for the ghost-road were first set into the high plateaus of Chogoris, and kissed by the storms, which imparted to them some of their elemental strength. He could feel that strength now, surging around them, coalescing at Ambaghai’s silent call. Every White Scar left felt it as well. It quickened the pulse of their blood and awoke in them the ancient fury which had carried their ancestors from one side of Chogoris to the other, carrying fire and steel to every corner of that wide world. Theirs had always been the way of the storm, the sudden darkness, the crash of thunder, the slash of lightning, the crush of wild snows and heavy rains.

Ambaghai’s necklace of teeth and bells and storm-stones rattled as the air grew wet and thick about him. Lightning crawled across the ruined bastion, and crept across what was left of the wall in crackling rivulets. It sparked and coiled about the battlesuits, which had ceased their advance. Kor’sarro knew that the pilots of the large constructs were likely beginning to panic as the storm interfered with their suits’ systems, and prevented them from attacking or retreating. The tau outside would be seeing the same interference. More than once, he had used Ambaghai’s affinity for the lightning to befuddle their enemy on Agrellan. It wouldn’t last long, but the White Scars would make good use of the time the Stormseer bought them.

Ambaghai was wreathed in lightning. It caressed his power armour like a lover, and clutched at his staff. It was only by dint of their long comradeship that Kor’sarro could detect the faint tremble in the Stormseer’s arms. Calling the storm was no conjurer’s trick. It required an iron will, and a mind sheathed in steel. Ambaghai sucked in a deeper breath, and he seemed to swell for a moment. Then, with a roar like one of the ancient stone-barrelled cannons of Quan-Jo, he slammed the butt of his staff down, and released the gathered lightning.

One by one, each of the battlesuits was caught in the storm’s talons, and began to twitch and shudder, as small explosions coursed through them. The lightning swept over them and pulsed out into their enemies beyond the walls, burning the drifts of snow to steam in its passing. The battlesuits, scorched black and gutted, had slumped, and were already being covered by the snow which had been stirred by Ambaghai’s wrath.

The Stormseer sank down the length of his staff, sweat dripping from his features. Kor’sarro sheathed his blade and caught Ambaghai as he slumped. ‘Easy, seer, summon your strength, for we have a hard ride ahead of us, and no

time for rest.’ He propelled the Stormseer towards Thursk. ‘Catch him, cousin,’ Kor’sarro said. He turned towards the others. ‘What are you staring for? The wind calls us. To your bikes, brothers. Our enemy thinks us trapped. She thinks us beaten and broken on the anvil of her cunning. But you cannot hammer smoke, and you cannot trap the lightning.’ He flung out a hand. ‘To your bikes! We shall show our foe the true way of war, our way!’

Thus invigorated, the White Scars raced to their bikes. Thursk hesitated. Kor’sarro met his gaze. ‘You know how to ride?’

‘The White Scars are not the only Chapter who use bikes, my khan,’ the Dark Hunter said. ‘What of those who cannot ride?’ he asked.

Kor’sarro hesitated, his eagerness dimming. There were more white armoured bodies lying in the snow than he’d wanted to admit. Not all of them were dead. He was saved from having to reply by Godi. The battle-brother still carried his heavy bolter, despite the wound which marked him. A blast from one of the battlesuits had ripped one of the shoulder plates from his power armour, and torn the latter open, so that sharp protrusions of metal jutted from his blistered and burnt torso and arm. His breathing was ragged, and the difficulty he was having just speaking was obvious. ‘We die, Dark Hunter,’ Godi croaked. ‘Aye and gladly, for what good are we, if we cannot ride,’ he said. It wasn’t a question.

‘We will return,’ Kor’sarro said, laying a hand on Godi’s unwounded arm. ‘Dead or alive, I will come back for you, hunt-brother, with the full might of the Third Minghan at my back.’

‘As you say, my khan,’ Godi said. ‘Hopefully, it’ll be the latter. Your swiftness would be appreciated.’ He patted the heavy bolter. ‘I’m almost out of ammunition.’

Kor’sarro had meant what he said. He would come back, if only to collect the gene-seed of the fallen. Joking aside, Godi knew as well as he that the likelihood of survival for those staying behind was slim to none. Wounded, low on ammunition and too far behind enemy lines for easy extraction. They would be forgotten, until the war was won or lost.

Of the wounded, there were only a few who couldn’t ride, or otherwise had volunteered to stay behind. Godi and another hefted the heavy bolters, and the others who could walk were ready to cover their fellows. Those who couldn’t move were carried to the gaps in the wall, with as much ammunition as could be spared.

The bikes that had no riders were stripped and laid to rest as if they were dead warriors. It pained the White Scars to do so, for each was, if not a relic, then as much a brother of the ordu as their fellow Space Marines. But even as their ancestors had slaughtered horses which could not be ridden, so would they

disable what they could not take with them. Nothing of the Chapter could fall into the hands of the enemy. That included the weapons they had stored in the bastion. As he mounted his bike, Kor'sarro clasped Godi's hand. 'You know what to do?' he said.

'If I live long enough, I'm to blow this cursed place off the ridge,' Godi grunted. Blood ran freely down his armour, plopping onto the ground. 'Deny the enemy our dead.'

Kor'sarro nodded shallowly. 'Only if it becomes necessary,' he said.

'Don't worry, my khan. Self-immolation isn't high on my list of preferred activities, even in good cause,' Godi rasped. 'Besides, it's entirely likely that they'll kill us before we get the chance.'

Kor'sarro sat back as his steed growled beneath him. The bike had been still for too long. It yearned to ride, to hurtle forward. He didn't look at Godi. 'I'm sorry, brother,' he said, softly. 'I led you into death.'

Godi shrugged. 'And so,' he said. 'At least it wasn't boring.'

Kor'sarro nodded and smiled. 'No, never that,' he said. Then, with a shout, he gunned the bike's engine. Wheels skidded and he shot forward, towards the largest gap in the wall. His riders fell in behind him, filling the air with noise. The bolters mounted on the chassis of each bike snarled a hymn of war as they followed him beyond the wall.

Only a few minutes had passed since Ambaghai had set the lightning on their enemy. The tau troops were unprepared for the sudden attack. Fire warriors tried to form up around the lightning-addled vehicles, and their impromptu phalanxes were shattered by the hurtling bikes. Kor'sarro didn't even bother to draw his sword. He extended an arm as he raced past, catching a tau in the neck, and flipping the alien into the air. Godi had followed them out through the wall, and the roar of his heavy bolter, as well as the weapons of the others, followed them as they raced through the ring of xenos steel that had surrounded the bastion.

The ridge trail was blocked by one of the smooth-bodied transports. Kor'sarro urged his steed up and the bike's wheels bit into the mottled plates of the vehicle as he rode up over it. His riders followed, shooting and shouting. He steadfastly resisted the urge to look back. 'Onward,' he roared, 'for the glory of the ordu, and for the khan and the Khan-of-Khans!'

CHAPTER FIVE

A burst of gibberish erupted from the newcomer, but smoothed out into a stream of heavily accented Gothic. ‘Surrender, Khan Kor’sarro, and you shall be spared,’ the tau said. There was no trace of a sneer in the demand, which only made it worse.

Cemakar blinked. Then he laughed. Jebe looked at him. ‘It thinks you’re the khan, boy,’ Cemakar said, in Khorchin. A faint look of satisfaction passed fleetingly across the champion’s face. Then he spat a curse and tossed his blade from hand-to-hand.

‘It insults us,’ he said.

‘We probably all look alike to them,’ Cemakar said. He chuckled weakly. ‘He was right, though. Eagles pick his bones, he was right. She was here, waiting for him. She thought he’d make a break for it, once he realised it was a trap.’ Jebe stared at him, comprehension slowly dawning on his burnt features. Cemakar waved his hand. ‘Well go on boy, reply to her. Don’t let her realise she’s made a mistake, whatever you do. She wants the khan. Give her the khan.’

Jebe nodded sharply, his eye alight with understanding. In that moment, Cemakar was proud of him. Jebe was headstrong, and as dumb as hammer-addled auroch, but no one could fault his courage. He’d have walked backwards into the Eye of Terror if Kor’sarro had asked it of him.

Shadowsun repeated her question. ‘Captivity is not the same as mercy,’ Jebe said, barking out his reply in stilted Gothic.

The tau cocked her head, as if trying to parse his accent. Then she said, ‘If you do not surrender, your men will die.’

‘All men die,’ Jebe said.

‘Yes, but preferably somewhere else,’ Tolui muttered. Cemakar laughed, though it hurt him to do so. He pushed himself up and looked around. They were surrounded. ‘This song sounds familiar,’ Tolui said.

Cemakar nodded. 'I'm growing tired of the tune myself,' he said. Ever since they had left Agrellan Prime, it had been one trap after another. The khamar were too tricky by half. 'On the whole, I'd rather be fighting orks. I – oh nine devils take him!' he coughed as Jebe, provoked beyond all reason by Shadowsun's insistence on surrender, had made his final thoughts on the matter known as, with a roar, he flung himself at her, his sword slicing towards her neck. 'When I said give her the khan I didn't mean attack.'

The white-armoured warrior moved with a sinuous grace that contrasted with the bulky battlesuit she wore. Jebe was hard-pressed to keep up, and his blade bit only air as he attacked. The tau's form flickered and blinked in and out of sight. He spun and whirled, trying to catch his opponent as she circled him. Every time his blade came close, one of the drones that accompanied her intercepted the blow.

Jebe snarled in fury as his sword rebounded off a drone's shimmering shield for the fifth time in as many moments. As he readjusted, his opponent smashed into him from the side, staggering him. Cemakar winced. He glanced over and saw Tolui taking aim with his bolter. 'Don't even think it. It's a waste of a shot and he won't thank you. Keep your eyes on the others,' he said. He levered himself up. 'That goes for all of you. When they've had their fun, that'll be the end of it, so you'd have best made your peace.'

Jebe whipped around, blade singing a deadly song. Shadowsun leapt straight up and skimmed back across the unsettled snows. She levelled the twin fusion blasters she carried and fired. Jebe flung himself aside. Even so, he only just managed to avoid the scalding blasts. He rolled through the snow, smoke rising from the patch of slagged ceramite on his side and hip. His power armour's inner working was untouched, but the outer plates had been melted and warped. Cemakar knew that a single direct hit would end the other's career as company champion, regardless of how tough he was.

Jebe recovered quickly enough, and shot forward. Shadowsun slid away, instinctively avoiding a slash that never came. Instead, Jebe stabbed at her. The point of his blade struck her armour again and again, carving deep ruts in the previously untouched surface. Shadowsun staggered with every blow, but she didn't fall. Her fusion blasters slammed together, pinning Jebe's blade between them. Shadowsun jerked him forward, and smashed an armoured boot into the champion's midsection. Jebe staggered back, without his weapon.

Shadowsun tossed it aside. She took aim at him, and he tensed, ready to dive at her regardless. Then she raised her arm. One of the Riptides lunged forward and swatted Jebe to the ground with bone-rattling finality. Cemakar sighed. At least the khan wouldn't have to suffer the ignominy of being captured. *Maybe he*

escaped, he thought. The thought cheered him somewhat. In the end, glory and honour were as nothing to freedom. Chains by any other name, they meant little to sons of Jaghatai. If by trick and by blood, they could buy an extra moment for their khan, that was the way of it. ‘Laugh while you kill, brothers. And laugh loud, so our brothers can hear us, and know what fun they’re missing,’ he said. He rose unsteadily to his feet. The world swam about him.

‘I don’t think we need to laugh all that loud,’ Tolui said, ‘listen!’

Cemakar turned. He’d heard the sound for some time, but had assumed it was coming from the tau. But now that he focused on it, he knew that no khamar engine had ever sounded so boisterous. His seamed face split in a smile. ‘I guess he survived after all.’ He pivoted and snapped off a shot at Shadowsun. ‘Well brothers – lets light their way for them, shall we?’

Tolui gave a bark of laughter and began to fire as well. Soon, the entire knot of survivors was blazing away in all directions. The tau seemed taken aback by the apparent madness of their enemy, and it was long moments before they began to return fire.

Cemakar cackled happily as he fired. *That would have been a good death*, he thought, *but this one will be much better.*

Bikes roared through the snow, shoving aside the curtains of smoke with the force of their passage. The shattered remnants of Cemakar’s forces littered Rime Crag, but the bark of bolter fire said that there were survivors yet. Kor’sarro hunched forward over his bike’s handlebars, as if to wring more speed from its shrieking engines by sheer will. Thursk rode at his side, snow stinging his pale features. He could see Ambaghai riding on the other side of the khan. The Stormseer’s face was twisted in a grimace of concentration, as he wrapped the column of riders in a swirl of snow in order to hide them from prying eyes and muffle the noise of their passage. Every time Thursk thought Ambaghai had reached the limits of his mental strength, the Stormseer dug deeper into himself, summoning up psychic might from untold depths.

The White Scars did not slow as they swept through the wreckage. Thursk could see enemy vehicles moving below, at the base of the ridge, keeping on a parallel course. They were troop transports, he thought, though he couldn’t be sure, just as he couldn’t say whether they were in pursuit, or heading somewhere else.

Cemakar’s group hadn’t got far before they were hit. He was surprised they hadn’t seen smoke, but then, with the way Ambaghai had stirred up the winds, and the way the snow was falling, he was more surprised that they could see anything at all. Kor’sarro’s voice snarled through the vox, barking orders.

‘Ambaghai – fill the air with lightning. See if you can disrupt their communications the way they’ve done to ours,’ he said. ‘The rest of you – do as you must. Laugh and slay. Today, we teach the enemy what it means to grab hold of the tiger’s tail.’

The White Scars roared in reply, waving weapons and firing their guns. Thursk ducked his head as the column of bikers ripped through a cloud of oily smoke. As they exited the smoke, he saw where the tau had been heading. A tiny knot of White Scars were firing at their approaching enemy from the lip of the ridge. Two of the larger tau battlesuits were menacing them, as several squads of fire warriors climbed the slope, pausing only to return the Space Marine’s fire sporadically.

The trap, when taken at a remove, was brilliant in its simplicity. Once the tanks had been rendered immobile, the White Scars were at the mercy of the faster moving tau. And tenacity was no substitute for firepower. If the battlesuits didn’t get them, the tau battle tanks would. And if neither of those did the job, then the fire warriors would almost certainly wear the remaining Space Marines down.

Kor’sarro roared out a command and chopped the air with his hand. Ambaghai weaved around behind Thursk and, accompanied by two other riders, shot towards the enemy warriors climbing the slope. Thursk saw the Stormseer whip the end of his staff through the air, and it was as if an invisible scythe cut through the unprepared xenos. The trio buzzed across the line of fire warriors, disassembling the formerly precise formation into bloody wreckage. It was a stalling tactic, Thursk knew, and nothing more. Ambaghai might have been able to do more but he would have to stop, and if he didn’t kill them all, the tau would swarm him under. There were simply too many of them, and too few of the White Scars.

‘There she is,’ Kor’sarro snarled. Thursk saw that his attention had been drawn to a strange, white armoured shape standing near the knot of survivors. It was a tau battlesuit, but like none Thursk had ever seen. As they neared, the slim battlesuit rose into the air and shot backwards.

‘Oh no, you don’t,’ Kor’sarro said, aiming his bike in pursuit. Following Kor’sarro, Thursk shot past the closest of the towering battlesuits, he saw a familiar form lying before it in the snow. The battlesuit lifted its foot over Jebe’s sprawled form. Thursk recalled vividly what the result of that would be and he swung his bike around in a tight skid. He didn’t like the champion much, but he wasn’t going to allow the White Scar to be pulped. Even Jebe deserved a better death than that. As the machine toppled, the Dark Hunter threw himself from the seat and, with the impetus of the bike’s slide behind him he interposed himself

between the fallen champion and the battlesuit. His palms slammed against the bottom of the battlesuit's foot, and the servos in his power armour whined in protest as he tried to stop the crushing descent.

The weight of it was incredible, more even than he'd imagined. He sank slowly to one knee, both arms bending back. 'Up, Jebe, get up,' he said. The White Scar groaned, and looked up blearily. 'Up, you stupid fool,' Thursk roared, kicking the White Scar in the side. The battlesuit redoubled its efforts and he felt a servo blow somewhere in his armour, and the hiss of a pierced cooling hose. Jebe scrabbled weakly at the snow. Thursk saw his fingers brush up against the eagle-headed pommel of his sword.

Jebe caught up the blade and rolled over, piercing the bottom of the suit's foot and jamming the pommel against the ground. Thursk let go, grabbed him and rolled them both aside as the battlesuit jerked and flailed, trying to right itself.

'You saved me,' Jebe spat.

'You're welcome,' Thursk said, pushing himself to his feet.

'I was not thanking you!'

'I apologise. The subtleties of Khorchin escape me,' Thursk said, recovering his axe and his bolter from the fallen bike. He flipped the axe around and proffered the haft to Jebe. 'Go get your sword, champion,' he said, as he extended the bolter and fired off a burst at the enemy swarming around them. 'I'll cover you.'

Jebe made a face, then snorted, spat and ran a thumb along the edge of the axe. 'I suppose this will have to do.' He turned, a feral grin rippling across his burned and blistered features. He bounded towards the still off-balance battlesuit. Thursk turned and began to fire at the approaching fire warriors, intending to leave Jebe to his fun.

The battlesuit had torn itself free of the blade and it retreated several steps. Jebe pursued it with all the tenacity of a man for whom size differentials were merely a matter of opinion. He jumped, and used the battlesuit's bent knee-joint as a springboard to propel him up its chest. The shield drones hummed about him, and he swiped at them irritably. The drones were less of an obstacle than an annoyance, if you got in close. He lunged for the battlesuit's square head. The battlesuit moved quickly, snatching him out of the air with its empty hand. Jebe cursed as the construct's grip began to tighten. Rivets popped and plates buckled. He hefted Thursk's axe and threw it directly into the battlesuit's optic sensor. The power axe buried itself in the boxy head, and the battlesuit staggered, blinded. The burst cannon on its other arm roared as it fired wildly, and it destroyed one of the drones by accident.

Its hand spasmed and Jebe tumbled to the ground. Thursk raced towards him,

palming a krak grenade from his belt. 'Catch,' he said, tossing it to the champion. Jebe caught it, as he ducked beneath the whirring burst cannon. Thursk circled the battlesuit, firing at the other sensor nodes that stuck out from the hulking battlesuit. The operator was likely already trying to reroute the sensor feed and regain his view of the battlefield. If that happened, he didn't put great odds on their survival. As he got behind it, he pulled a second grenade from his belt, activated it and rolled it beneath the battlesuit's damaged foot.

The battlesuit twitched as it stepped on the frag grenade, barely registering the explosion as the ground disintegrated beneath its foot. It reeled forward, sinking to one knee. The bolter clicked, empty, and Thursk dropped it and drew his knife as he leapt for its back. He caught hold of a shattered sensor node and swung up. 'Draw its fire,' he shouted, trying to hold on as the battlesuit began to struggle to its feet. The remaining shield drone buzzed towards him, and he caught it with his fist, knocking it aside.

Jebe didn't argue. He'd reclaimed his sword, and with a slash, he opened a hole in the side of the burst cannon mount. As the battlesuit spun, firing, Jebe tossed the krak grenade into the hole, and brought his sword down on the spinning barrels of the cannon, hacking through them. The grenade exploded a moment later, and subsequent internal explosions ripped up the battlesuit's arm. It reared back with a groan of abused metal.

Thursk had climbed to the top, and with his knife, pried open several of the hull plates. He stuffed grenades into each of the openings, activating them. Then he grabbed hold of his axe and dropped from the battlesuit. 'Move,' he roared, scrambling away. Jebe followed suit as the battlesuit was consumed in fire.

They watched as it crumbled, shuddering in its death throes. They turned together as they heard the crunch of boots on snow. Fire warriors moved towards them, rifles extended. If they were disconcerted by the destruction of the battlesuit, they didn't show it. 'Brave,' Thursk said, spinning his axe.

'Good. Cowards make poor prey,' Jebe said.

'You're welcome, by the way,' Thursk said.

'I still have not thanked you. I did not require your aid,' Jebe said.

'No, I'm sure you didn't,' Thursk said. He gestured with his axe. 'After you, Chogorian,' he said. Jebe grunted and raised his sword.

'Stay close, Phobian. I'll keep you safe.'

Then, with a roar, Jebe sprang towards the advancing tau. Thursk followed.

Kor'sarro brought the bike to a halt in a cloud of smoke and superheated snow. His bolt pistol was in his hand, and he swivelled in his saddle, firing once, twice, three times, each shot dropping one of the advancing fire warriors. The rest of

the group retreated with all due haste, falling back to regroup. Cemakar looked up at him. 'Tanks broke down,' he grunted.

'So I see,' Kor'sarro said. He holstered his pistol. 'You seem to have things under control.' Cemakar made a face. Kor'sarro's eyes were drawn to the blood still seeping from the wound in Cemakar's side and he shared a glance with one of the White Scars nearby – Tolui, he thought. It should have sealed over by now. Doubtless, if the old man simply sat down, it would have, but that wasn't Old Shatterhand's way. He wouldn't rest until he was dead. *And perhaps not even then*, he mused. He was pleased to see that the old man had survived. He had feared that they would arrive in time only to avenge Cemakar and the others. Cemakar might still die, come to that. He pushed the thought aside. 'It's been almost twelve hours – the Khwarezmian should be nearby. Ambaghai's lightning will have interfered with their jamming frequencies,' Kor'sarro said, looking at Cemakar. 'Hook him, old man. We've got the jaws pried open, but we still need someone to pull us out. We need Gharchai and his men, and we need them now.'

Cemakar hefted the vox and shoved it towards Tolui. 'You heard him. Summon the Khwarezmian.' He looked at Kor'sarro and said, 'Thought you'd decided to sit this one out, boy.'

'What, and leave all the fun to you? Perish the thought, old man,' Kor'sarro said. He laughed and gunned his bike's engine, scattering snow and sliding past the wreckage and on into battle. The enemy was disorganised, reeling in shock from the sudden appearance of a mobile force of eager warriors. He had seen it again and again since arriving on Agrellan – if the White Scars weakness was that they reacted too swiftly, then the tau were guilty of the opposite. They built strategies like spider-webs, intricate and surprisingly strong, but infinitely vulnerable to a gust of wind or a careless motion.

There were many ways to wage war from the saddle. Wheel-and-spoke was one, the way of the rabbit another. But the best way, the way that his chosen excelled at, was the way of old, the way of the storm. Every warrior was the eye of their own storm, requiring neither aid nor the command of a khan to isolate and destroy the enemy. That was the method they used now, each rider using what skills they possessed and what weapons they had to hand, to distract, harass and butcher the enemy.

Ambaghai had made himself over into a boiling storm of furious lightning. Where he rode, the storm followed, disrupting electronics and burning flesh and leaving a trail of destruction in his wake. The Dark Hunter and Jebe fought back-to-back, both afoot, but neither at a disadvantage because of it. Both warriors slashed and spun, tearing through the enemy like dervishes. Kor'sarro whipped past them without slowing. They did not require his aid, and he had his own prey

to chase.

Shadowsun was here somewhere. He could smell her scent, and see her hand at work. She was a hunter, like him, and she would not miss the kill. Not for anything. He just had to find her. As he tore through the battle, he saw a rider, whirling a bandolier of krak grenades over his head like a lariat, swept past a hovering battle tank and hurled the grenades, hooking the main cannon. As he thundered on, the grenades exploded and the tank dipped as if in shock, its anti-gravity engines whining in protest as the force of the explosion caused its hull to scrape the ground. Out of control, it skidded through the battle, sending fire warriors scrambling to get out of its path as it crashed into the slope and was ripped apart by internal explosions.

Other riders wielded powerlances or fired bolters as they zipped through the lines of the fire warriors, piercing the alien phalanxes as they tried to form and make a stand. Kor'sarro saw a rider burst through a group of tau and ride his back up into the rear bay of a Hammerhead, the bolters mounted on the front of his bike blazing away. The rider slewed the bike around and rode back the way he'd come before the fire warriors could even register what he'd done. The explosions that followed his departure attested to the grenades he'd left behind.

But the White Scars didn't have it all their own way. There weren't enough of them to do more than cause confusion. Speed was no substitute for raw numbers, and here and there, Space Marines had become bogged down in the sheer number of troops that Shadowsun had brought. Alien rifles fired and a bike flipped end over end, and its rider crashed down. He rolled to his feet, bolt pistol in hand, only to catch a burst from a fusion blaster directly in the chest. The White Scar was plucked from his feet and sent sailing backwards as his armour cracked and split open like the shell of a boiled crustacean. Smoke wreathed his falling shape as he crashed down. Kor'sarro arrowed towards the fallen Space Marine; he'd seen where the blast that had killed him had come from. Shadowsun was nearby. He caught sight of her distinctive armour, wreathed in the excess of Ambaghai's lightning, its cloaking field crackling and bleeding away as the supreme commander of the enemy forces now besieging Agrellan and the Damocles Gulf as a whole, stood exposed before him.

She stood before the wreckage of Cemakar's Razorback, firing at the riders who sped past her. Kor'sarro had given orders that she was not to be engaged, save on his command, and his men were attempting to stay out of her way. Even from a distance, he could tell that she was growing frustrated. He smiled and leaned low in his saddle to whisper encouragement to his steed as the bike shot towards his prey.

CHAPTER SIX

Kor'sarro took the moment with a hunter's daring. Engines growled in pleasure as he rode the bike up the burning hull of the wrecked Razorback, passed through the flames, and caught the wind. Wheels spinning, the bike shot towards the hovering form of Shadowsun. Kor'sarro tore Moonfang from its sheath as his proximity registered with the tau commander. Like a rabbit caught in the shadow of an eagle, Shadowsun turned and brought up one of her fusion blasters, but too slowly.

The bike's front wheel smashed into her chest and head and they fell in a tangle, slamming down onto Rime Crag in an explosion of snow and with a snarl of metal on metal. The impact dislodged Kor'sarro from his saddle, but he was on his feet in a moment. Moonfang licked out, chopping through a shield drone and cutting it into two sparking halves. Shadowsun was up a moment later, batting the bike aside with a whirr of unseen pistons even as the fusion blaster on her other arm came up and fired.

Kor'sarro stepped aside. Heat from the blast washed over him, crisping the tips of his moustaches. He recovered quickly, snatching his bolt pistol from its holster. He snapped off a shot from the hip, and was rewarded by Shadowsun staggering. He fired again, but the second shield drone interfered. Shadowsun recovered. She cocked her head. 'Khan Kor'sarro, I presume,' she said in Gothic, her voice amplified by her armour's vox-casters.

Kor'sarro restrained a growl of disgust. The language of Terra was not, by any stretch, his favourite tongue, but the Emperor had decreed that it was *Imperator Lingua* – the voice of humanity. To hear an alien debasing it so revolted him. 'I am Kor'sarro Khan, Master of the Hunt and Sword of the Khan. And you are Shadowsun,' he said.

'My fame precedes me,' she said. Though it was difficult to tell, given her accent and the distortion of the vox-caster, he thought that that had been a joke.

He shook his head.

‘A hunter knows his prey,’ he said. He extended Moonfang and circled her with a duellist’s grace. Her armour was heavier than his, but not as battle-tested. She was hesitant, where a more confident warrior would be aggressive, as if she were as yet uncertain of her battlesuit’s limits. Or perhaps she was holding back for fear of killing him. The thought grated, but he shoved the insult aside. That was his advantage, not hers.

‘And a huntress knows hers,’ Shadowsun said.

‘I almost had you at Blackshale Ridge,’ Kor’sarro said.

‘Indeed. We were surprised. We are not used to being on the back-foot.’ She had begun to circle him, even as he circled her, matching his movements, if not his grace. Her armour was scorched and scored, but it didn’t appear damaged. Nonetheless, his keen eyes picked out a number of possible weak points, where a thrust from Moonfang might pierce the armour and possibly reach the meat within the shell. ‘Do you understand my meaning?’

‘I take it well enough,’ he said. He lowered Moonfang slightly. She would not take it as an invitation to attack, he knew. Her armour was kitted out for distance, and power, not personal duels. She was trying to keep him occupied while her warriors picked off his. That had been her plan all along. A slow whittling, a gradual bleeding, to weaken, but not kill him, like a hunter prodding a wild auroch until the beast collapsed at last, its fury spent. They were still fighting, but with words now, rather than blades. They were feeling each other out, so that the final blow could be delivered as effectively as possible. ‘It is our way,’ he said. ‘But you know that now, no?’ He narrowed his eyes. ‘You have been studying us. We have fought before, but only in isolated engagements. This was your chance to see how we waged war and you took it. You lead us in, and took us apart to see how we functioned. You gave us too much room, and then too little, stretched us and squeezed us and baited us into ever more narrow burrows. You were clever.’

‘Not clever enough, clearly,’ she said. ‘You are here.’

He smiled, despite himself. ‘But that is what you expected, eh? That is why you are here, rather than back there. You thought I would lead the charge. So you came to capture me personally. Was that what your hunting eagles were for, to wear me out?’ She said nothing and he continued, ‘The kroot. They were fighting to disable, not kill. I’d wager there was more than one pack of them, just in case.’

A sound slithered from her. It took him a moment to realise that it was laughter. ‘I have fought your kind before. Few have proven themselves so quick,’ she said. ‘You fight and think fast. That is why you had to be chained. If you

fight so differently, you must think differently. If you think differently, then you can be reasoned with.’ The bolt pistol in his hand twitched, and the shield drone reacted with predictable speed, responding to the micro-gesture. He wondered if her battlesuit was analysing him, gauging his heart rate and breathing, recording, cataloguing everything about him, for her masters to pore over once this campaign was done.

They wish to tame the storm, he thought. They wanted to chain and compel that which should not be chained, and force a false order over the natural. It was their way. As it was the way of the White Scars to defy such. *You are the centre*, he thought, eyeing her. *You are the spoke, and your warriors the wheel. Where you go, the true war is fought.* ‘Reasoned with,’ he said. He must know more. Every word, every gesture was its own tale. What war was he fighting? Was this for Agrellan or something greater?

‘You do not think like the others,’ Shadowsun said. ‘Your thoughts are more fluid. More like ours,’ she continued, switching to a crude dialect of Khorchin. ‘My folk grew strong on the plains, like yours. We broke cities then and we have broken worlds since, just as you have done.’ His lips peeled back from his teeth, but not in a smile. Not now. ‘Set your sword aside, and we will speak at length, over glasses of *chinyua* wine and a game of Go, Khan Kor’sarro. We will speak of Chogoris, and the ways of plains folk, and warriors. We will speak of the Greater Good.’

If he had been any other man, Kor’sarro knew that the temptation would have been overwhelming. There were too many layers of meaning in her words, implicit threats and promises that would take days to decode. The hunter in him longed to follow all of the tracks and trails she was laying before him. But he was not simply a hunter – he was the Master of the Hunt, and he had his duty.

He sighed and looked up at the stars, fading into the dull iron sky of an Agrellan dawn. This world was poisoned, and worth nothing but the lives that would be spent in its defence, including those of him and his men, if that was the way of it. ‘I would like some wine,’ he said and his lips quirked in a smile, as he looked at her. ‘But we have already been playing, huntress, and the time has come to draw our game to an end.’

Kor’sarro slid forward, barely stirring the snow. The shield drone hummed between them as he raised his bolt pistol. He fired rapidly, but not at either the drone or its mistress. Instead, he fired at the ground. His shots tore steam from the slushy ground as each of the explosive bolts super-heated the snow into a white fog which cascaded upwards, enveloping him and his enemy both. The shield drone hovered, blinded, and he took it first, catching it from below with Moonfang. Piercing the drone, he slung it towards Shadowsun, who fired

instinctively, erasing her own drone from existence. He was on her a moment later, his sword chopping down through the barrel of one of her weapons, rendering it useless.

She flung the shattered weapon aside as she brought up its twin and fired. Her jetpack roared and she slid backwards, away from him, still firing. He pursued her, narrowly avoiding the blasts. The world narrowed to just him and her. He held Moonfang in both hands, arms cocked, ready for the killing thrust. If he could just reach her, even if she killed him, it would be over. She knew it as well as he did. It had been a calculated risk on her part, as it had been on his. Victory was never the sweeter than when it was balanced by death.

Cat-quick, Kor'sarro leapt. She fired, and he felt heat brush past him, scouring his shoulderplate of its white and red markings, and leaving only the grey of bare ceramite as he crashed down on her, driving his sword down with all of his weight behind it. She twisted, desperate now, and the blade caressed her side, tearing through the white armour like paper. He grabbed for her helm, digging talon-like fingers into it, trying to destroy her optic sensors, to blind her for the kill.

A blade, a primitive looking knife, flashed, suddenly appearing in her hand. It kissed his neck, drawing a thin weal of blood. They hit the ground in a tangle, and her feet caught him in the belly, propelling him away. He lost his grip on Moonfang and slid across the ground. She tossed aside her remaining blaster and tore her crushed and mangled helmet from her head. A topknot of hair as crimson as a Chogorian sunset unspooled and snapped out as a slate-blue face, with large, dark eyes glared at him. He recognised the look in those eyes, alien as they were. 'Maybe we are alike,' he said, drawing his combat knife. 'Come then, huntress. Come and take my scalp.'

With a cry, she lunged for him, knife in hand. They reeled back and forth through the snow, blocking and slashing. Her blade bit into his vambraces, driven deep into the ceramite by the powered exoskeleton of her armour. His own knife gouged great scars in her armour, driven as much by his own muscle as his power armour. They whirled about one another in a deadly dance, and he laughed deep and loud and long for the pleasure of it.

They crashed together, blade to blade, and he leaned towards her, smiling widely. In her eyes he saw reflected the joy that he knew danced in his own. *We are not so different, Shadowsun, and in other circumstances, I would dance with you again. You are a worthy challenge*, he thought. 'And you would tame us?' he said, 'for shame. There is no taming the storm and there is no chaining the hunters of the stars. There is only the hunt, and death. Duty, honour, empire, these are but shadows in this moment, in all moments,' he said. They strained

against one another, heads so close that he could smell her sweat, and see his face reflected in her eyes. 'You know that, as well as I, huntress. You feel it as well, and that is why you are doomed to fail,' he said, stabbing to the core of her with each word. There was something indefinable in her gaze – determination, perhaps, tinged with what might have been sadness. The joy had faded. She had lost herself, but only for a moment. He felt a surge of satisfaction that he had been able to give her that much, even if it had only been a single moment of freedom.

Their knives grated against one another. She longed to kill him, to cut his heart out with her blade and her hands. But that was not the way of it, not today. She shoved him back and withdrew, her armour carrying her speedily away from him. He stumbled momentarily off balance. She scooped up her fusion blaster and spun, levelling it at him before he could reach her. He felt a moment of sadness, both for her sake and his own. She was a cunning creature, locked in chains that she didn't even see. She deserved a clean death, a warrior's death, if nothing else. Instead, he would die here, and his men would die, and it would all be for nothing.

'He's here,' Tolui said, 'he's coming.' He looked up from the vox. 'The Khwarezmian rides, my khan.' The vox in his hands crackled, and Khorchin curses spattered the air in erratic fashion. That was Gharchai all right, Cemakar thought. No one else in the ordu had as wide or as sulphurous a vocabulary as the Khwarezmian.

Cemakar backhanded a fire warrior that got too close and stomped on the downed xenos's chest. He fired his bolt pistol, emptying the clip. Shadowsun had brought more troops than he'd thought. The tau had unpleasantly accurate fire, and his armour was scorched and marked by the evidence of that accuracy, as well as his position as Tolui's breathing shield. 'Well, it's about time,' he growled. He tossed aside the empty pistol and scooped up a chunk of still-smouldering wreckage, to block the firepower coming his way.

They were in a stand-off. There weren't enough White Scars to break the enemy, but the enemy weren't determined enough to push through. The tau were squeamish, for which he was thankful. They spared concern for their wounded, and refused to commit suicide. It made them harder to kill in bulk, but kept them from mounting an effective assault. 'Contact the others. We need to regroup and hit them as one, so that the Khwarezmian can sweep them from the ridge. Where is the Stormseer?' Lightning crackled, and tau screamed as something exploded. Cemakar shook his head. 'Never mind, there he is. Leave him to it. But contact Jebe and that dark armoured nitwit with the axe. Get them back here.'

Tolui bent to obey. Cemakar scanned the battlefield. It was as disorganised a mess as any warrior of the ordu could hope for, and he took a certain pride in the general air of confusion which lingered over things. This was how war should be waged, a riot of colour and noise, eventually subsumed in silence. Shots struck the chunk of wreckage he was using as a shield. Every vibration that shook the twisted metal in his hands shook a bit more blood from the wound in his side. He was dying. The fact did not frighten him. He had come close many times over his long life, and when he met it, it would be as a friend.

That said he didn't intend to make it easy on whoever killed him. The fire warriors were getting closer, trying to pound him flat with sheer volume of fire. He lunged forward and crashed into the group, treading them under or sending them flying. He used the chunk of wreckage like a club, swatting them from their feet. When it became too unwieldy, he tossed it aside and hefted a dazed tau over his head and sent him flying into his fellows with bone shattering force. Pain tore through him, as one of the alien soldiers rammed a knife into his open wound. Cemakar caught his opponent's arm and jerked the fire warrior forward, dropping his elbow on top of the smooth curve of the alien's helmet. Metal buckled, and the tau dropped insensate. 'Where is the khan?' he shouted to Tolui, plucking the knife from his side. He upended the blade and sent it spinning into the barrel of a tau rifle. The weapon exploded as its owner tried to fire. 'If he knows that Gharchai is on the way, maybe he won't do anything stupid.'

'I saw him head that way, in pursuit of the xenos witch,' Tolui said. He cracked a tau in the head with the vox. 'Go find him, old man, we'll hold here.'

Cemakar hesitated and then nodded. Stiffly, one hand pressed to his side, he moved across the ridge. Bikes roared past, guns blazing. The tau were trying to regroup, but seemed confused, as if their commander was otherwise occupied. Cemakar grunted. He had a feeling that he knew why that might be. Something cold clutched at his hearts, as if a shadow had passed over him. Maybe Ambaghai wasn't the only one the spirits spoke to. He began to run, despite the pain, despite the ache in his side and the red fog that nearly blinded him. Wherever Shadowsun was, that was where Kor'sarro would be.

He caught sight of the familiar flash of Moonfang, in the light of the nearing dawn. Something in him tore and he coughed blood. He saw them strain against one another, his khan and the alien commander, saw them break apart, saw the weapon rising in her hand, and he knew what was coming next and without a second thought, he leapt.

Kor'sarro tensed, ready to make his final lunge. Her finger tightened on the trigger.

Cemakar crashed into him as the fusion blaster roared. Kor'sarro scrambled to

his feet. He looked down into the old man's upturned face. 'They're... here,' he wheezed, smoke rising from between his lips. 'The Khwarezmian has come.'

Kor'sarro turned and saw shadows sweeping across Rime Crag, as the Stormbringer Squadron entered the fray. Land Speeders and Land Speeder Storms raced through the air, weapons firing as they weaved over and between the tau transports. The remaining battlesuit turned about and fired, plucking one of the Land Speeders from the air, but it was forced to hunker behind its shields as more swarmed it, circling it and firing at it from every angle. The battlesuit was fast, but the Land Speeders were faster.

A Land Speeder Typhoon turned sharply, its lethal payload erupting from the twin pods mounted on its upper hull. Missiles streaked towards the battlesuit, consuming its shield-drones and rocking the heavy battlesuit. It refused to fall or retreat however, and it raised its weapon, pursuing the Typhoon with a barrage of its own. More Land Speeders circled it, cutting tight turns and engaging in a dazzling display of aeronautic acrobatics such as only the White Scars could conceive of. Multi-meltas seared the air, and heavy bolters bellowed. The battlesuit reeled as smoke erupted from the craters that now pockmarked its frame.

With the battlesuit thus occupied, the rest of the squadron peeled off, homing in on the transponders carried by every White Scar biker. Missiles streaked from the Typhoons, corkscrewing into the open compartments of the tau transports as the fire warriors began to retreat. Land Speeders hunted the xenos, chewing up the ground around them with heavy bolter fire in an effort to herd them away from the surviving White Scars.

Other Land Speeders hurtled down the line of the ridge, assault cannons roaring a red greeting. Shadowsun turned, her smooth features wrinkling in consternation. She lifted her fusion blaster, and then lowered it with a shake of her head.

Kor'sarro still knelt beside Cemakar. Old Shatterhand was dying, red bubbles forming at the corners of his mouth as he tried to speak, to breathe. He'd been cut in two by the blast, and Kor'sarro shifted slightly, so that Cemakar couldn't see his own legs lying some distance away. 'I-told you so,' the old man hissed. His fist tapped weakly against Kor'sarro's leg. 'Stupid,' he gurgled.

'Easy old man, the Khwarezmian is here. You'll be fine. You've survived worse,' Kor'sarro said, knowing it was a lie even as he said it. 'You'll survive this.' He looked up. The sound of engines shook the ridge. Hasik and his bikers had made it through and come back. The khamar were making a fighting withdrawal. Their ambush had been ambushed, and they knew when they were beaten. They wouldn't stay gone long, however. He knew that they would have a

long, hard ride ahead of them, back to their own lines. The old man gripped his wrist, and Kor'sarro looked down.

'My tanks are dead,' Cemakar said, staring up at the lightening sky. 'Now so am I.' His gaze sharpened, just for a moment. 'They'll make me a Ghost Warrior, boy,' he rasped, and there was real fear in his words. For the first time, in his final moments, Old Shatterhand was frightened. The thought of being interred within the armoured sarcophagus of a Dreadnought caused even the staunchest warrior of the ordu to quail. To be made one of the Ghost Warriors meant an eternity of sterile slaughter, never to feel the wind or taste the blood of the enemy. Bloody fingers dug into Kor'sarro's arm. 'Don't let them.' He coughed. His eyes were wide. Blood spattered into his beard. Then with a querulous sigh, his face went slack, and his hands flopped limply to the snow.

Kor'sarro hesitated. There was an Apothecary with Gharchai, he knew. Cemakar would be stabilised, kept hovering between the land of blood and the land of ghosts until such time as he could be encased in an adamantine bio-coffin and join the ranks of the living dead. He was too valuable to lose to such a shallow death. Old Shatterhand was a legend – a god-killer and a master of war. The seers would oversee his return and they would awaken him to fight anew.

Unless there was nothing left to awaken.

He looked up at Shadowsun, who was shouting orders to her troops. She met his eyes as he rose to his feet. 'He was my commander, once,' he said, softly. He knew she could hear him. 'He was never my friend, for he had none. But he was my brother, and my teacher and he did not deserve this death. And he does not deserve what will happen next.'

They stared at one another, as the battle swept on around them. She had faced Dreadnoughts before, he knew. Even as she likely knew, after all this time studying the warriors of the ordu what such a fate meant to them. Then, just as he began to fear that he'd misjudged her, Shadowsun inclined her head slightly and he stepped back. Her fusion blaster vomited plasma and Cemakar's body was enveloped in a pyrrhic shroud. Kor'sarro expelled a breath and looked at her. 'Your days are numbered. Count them one by one, and cherish them. You have earned this one, but our dance is not yet finished, huntress. Wherever you go, wherever you wage war, I will pursue you, and when the appointed day dawns, your head will join the others on the White Road.'

Shadowsun held his gaze for a moment. 'We could have been great friends, huntsman,' she said, finally. Her armour wavered and a moment later, she was gone, lost to his sight. The sounds of bolterfire trickled off as the tau retreated, leaving Rime Crag to the battered remnants of the Third Company.

Kor'sarro looked down at the char-stain that marked Cemakar's passing and

nodded to himself. 'Yes,' he said, 'I rather think we could have.' He sheathed Moonfang and trudged up towards the summit of the ridge. The survivors had fallen back to join the new arrivals.

He could see the Khwarezmian among them, his armour wreathed in silks and furs, and his beaked helmet painted to resemble a wolf's skull. Gharchai clasped forearms with him when Kor'sarro reached them a few moments later. 'My khan, I'm glad to see that you haven't killed them all. I was worried when we couldn't find them on our sweep,' the Khwarezmian said, one hand resting on the pommel of the heavy-blade tulwar sheathed on his hip. He cocked his head. 'The old man,' he asked.

Kor'sarro gestured to the sky. 'His spirit rides with the storms. As do those of our brothers who enabled us to escape the trap we were led into. As all of ours may do, before this day is done.' He slapped a hand against Gharchai's arm. 'But we're not dead yet. Mount up, brothers. We must be quick. The enemy will regroup and seek to harry us,' he said, as he looked around. 'A new day is upon us, and we still have a war to wage.' He paused. 'Our hunt is over. We ride for Agrellan Prime.'

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

PHIL KELLY has been a devotee of myths, monsters and magic for three decades, the last of which has been spent working as a games developer in Games Workshop's Design Studio. Over the years, Phil has pursued various exotic careers but since meeting his future wife at a Los Angeles beach party, he has settled down a bit. He now leads a nice normal life writing about fantastical armies, undead pirates and gribbly from outer space.

GUY HALEY is the author of the Space Marine Battles novel *The Death of Integrity*, as well as *Skarsnik* and *Baneblade*. He worked for many years on magazines, including Games Workshop's *White Dwarf*. Since 2009 he has been a wandering writer, working in both magazines and novels. He lives in Somerset with his wife and son.

BEN COUNTER is the author of the Imperial Fists sagas *Malodrax*, *Seventh Retribution* and *Endeavour of Will*. He has also written the Horus Heresy novels *Galaxy in Flames* and *Battle for the Abyss*, along with Warhammer 40,000 series featuring the Soul Drinkers and Grey Knights. He is a fanatical painter of miniatures, a pursuit which has won him his most prized possession: a prestigious Golden Demon award. He lives in Portsmouth, England.

JOSH REYNOLDS has blazed a trail across the Warhammer World with the novels *Master of Death*, *Neferata* and *Knight of the Blazing Sun*, along with the Gotrek and Felix tales *Charnel Congress*, *Road of Skulls* and *The Serpent Queen*. As well as numerous short stories, he has also written the Warhammer 40,000 audio drama *Master of the Hunt* and contributed to the Apocalypse anthology *Damocles* with the novella *Hunter's Snare*. He lives and works in Sheffield.



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