



WARHAMMER
40,000

TEMPESTUS

BRADEN CAMPBELL

A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVELLA



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

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

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

‘Oh, Ixoi, Ixoi. How cruel is our fate, to be denied by distance! You pull from above, I swell from below, but never, it seems, may we embrace. Must we only be content to gaze at one another; you, my fattened warrior, and I, your Goddess of the Brine?’

– Cantos Continuous, M41

CHAPTER ONE

The Shelsists had done well to hide themselves. They held their profane gathering in the deep recesses of a ruined librarium, where the thick walls would muffle their chants and hymns. They had draped a thick curtain of dried seaweed across the only entrance so as to hide the light from their torches. They had spread algae flowers in the dirt to conceal their footprints. To the casual observer, there was nothing amiss in the dead and silent city.

The Canoness knew better. She stood atop a shattered column, scanning the area before her. Lysios's moon hung, as ever, huge in the sky. It wasn't even at its fullest yet, but so plentiful was the dull red light it cast over the land that she could have read from the *Prime Edicts*. But there was no need; she had memorised the words of the Holy Synod decades ago.

'When the people forget their duty,' she recited in a whisper, 'they are no longer human and become something less than beasts. They have no place in the bosom of humanity nor in the heart of the Emperor. Let them die and be forgotten.'

She raised her right hand and made a flicking motion. The rest of the Sisters moved up to join her, silent except for the rustling of heavy robes and the creaking of powered armour. When they reached the base of the column, they knelt.

The Canoness turned and surveyed them. They would do their duty, as they had so many times before on this forsaken, deluged world. But these worshippers of the Brine Goddess were unusual for heretics. They bore none of the four traditional evil marks. They did not flagellate themselves or sever their digits. Rather, they were all but indistinguishable from the bulk of the planet's citizenry. She worried that because of this, her charges might harbour regrets towards their duty. The Sisters of Battle were defenders of the faith, after all, not wanton murderers. She decided that a rousing homily was needed.

'The Emperor gave up His life as a ransom so that humanity might live, so great is His love for mankind. The faithful repay Him with daily thanks and prayer, and they serve Him with all their heart, soul, and strength.'

Bowed heads nodded in agreement.

'But there are those on this world who renounce the Emperor's love, who cheapen His gift by

offering their allegiance and devotion to false deities. What should He then do? Ignore this insult? Condone such behaviour? Or rather, should He administer punishment and correction, as a loving father would to his wayward children?’

She paused dramatically, just long enough to let her listeners consider the question and reach a unified conclusion.

‘The worshippers of Shelse are devious, yes. They hide their heresy well, but the Emperor sees the wickedness within their hearts. He is not fooled by outward appearances and neither, dear Sisters, must we be. We are His chosen; He tasks us to purge the unclean so that the faithful may thrive. With bolt and blade and flame, we must make examples of all who would spurn Him.

‘Superior Tarsha!’

One head among eight snapped up. ‘Yes, Canoness Grace?’

‘Can you vouch for the dedication of those who serve beneath you?’

The young woman smiled. ‘Yes, of course. We are ready to tread the path of righteousness.’

‘Then prepare your Sisters.’

Tarsha stood and spread her arms wide. As she began to recite the Adepta Sororitas battle-prayer, Canoness Grace turned back towards the librarium entrance.

For months now, she had led a continuing series of pogroms against the native religions of Lysios. The Shelsists, however, were the worst. No sooner had she put down one enclave of them, than another would establish itself. Their refusal to be eradicated was maddening enough, but what Grace truly hated was the romanticism of their sect.

The litanies of the Shelsists were an unending series of crude poems. Each was purported to come from the goddess of the sea, and none of them, the Canoness thought, was particularly well-written. She had come across hundreds of them in her quest, and each one contained the same awful, wistful tone. The author might as well have been a besotted teenage girl as an ocean deity. Still, something in the unrequited love story between the sea and the moon struck a chord with certain people on Lysios. The worship and veneration of Shelse had penetrated every level of society, from the lowest kelp harvester to the highest nobility. Even the planetary governor, it was said, had submitted himself to their heresy. Why else would he have gone into hiding as soon as the Canoness had begun putting the unfaithful to the fire?

Superior Tarsha completed the prayer by asking the Emperor to condemn His enemies to eternal death and damnation. ‘That Thou wouldst bring them only death, that Thou shouldst spare none, that Thou shouldst pardon none, we beseech Thee, destroy them.’

In unison, the Sisters touched their foreheads, their chests and finally their weapons, signifying faith in mind, heart, and deed. Then they rose silently, and waited for their leader.

The Canoness jumped down from the column, her feet making deep impressions in the pebbly, seashell-littered ground. She pulled a bulky pistol from the holster on her hip. ‘I shall lead. Flamer and heavy bolter on my flanks.’

While the Sisters assembled themselves into formation, Superior Tarsha dashed forward and tore down the seaweed curtain. Beyond was a long and partially collapsed passageway. The light from Ixoi illuminated only the archway. The interior was very dark.

‘Braziers,’ Grace ordered.

Mounted on each of the Canoness’s shoulders was a metal cage filled with coals soaked in consecrated oil. Tarsha reached up from behind her and lit them. The coals burst into flame, and a

wavering yellow light surrounded the Canoness. Eerie shadows danced all around.

They had proceeded only a short distance when they came to a curving stairway that descended into the catacombs. The stone walls were encrusted with white residue and glistened in the firelight. Grace touched them as she went. The fingers of her glove came away wet. Raising them to her lips, she was unsurprised to taste salt.

She ignored the several side passages they came to. The chambers beyond were lifeless and filled with damp, rotting wooden shelves and heaps of mush that had once been books and scrolls.

There was a faint echoing of voices from below. The Canoness signalled for the others to freeze, and peered around the curving wall. Eight men, large and bulky across the shoulders, were standing at the base of the stairs. Their armour appeared to be made of weighty iron plates fastened to a rubber undersuit with rivets and pieces of thick rope. Half of them were armed with a type of large, cartridge-fed speargun commonly used by the local fisherman. Two of them had shock nets. A low fire burned in an empty fuel drum and the remaining two men were warming themselves by it. Their backs were to the Canoness.

Grace frowned. Thus far, the Shelsists had been poorly organised and almost pathetically armed. The presence of these men seemed to mark a change in all that. They were wearing modified diving suits, she realised; heavy and potentially bulletproof. Additionally, she had seen the kinds of creatures the mariners of Lysios went to sea for. Their spearguns were designed to puncture blubbery hides and bulletproof shells. Their nets were made of metal cabling and could be electrified before being thrown.

The Canoness glanced at the Sisters on her flanks. Cairista, the flame wielder, was on her right. Sister Fayhew, she who wielded the blessed heavy bolter, waited on the left. When each of them signalled their readiness, Canoness Grace swept around the curved wall with bolt and fire on her wings.

When fired on an open battlefield, a heavy bolter was loud. In the confines of the librarium basement, it was truly deafening. Two of the guards were hit by shells as large as a closed fist. The iron plates of their suits could provide no protection. They were thrown backwards into the fire barrel, which tumbled over on to its side. Grace sent a bolt of white-hot plasma through the chest of one of the speargun carriers. He collapsed, and portions of his chestplate formed molten pools on the floor. Cairista covered the remaining five men in a wave of flames. Two more of the guards went down screaming. The stairway was filled with acrid smoke that stank of burning rubber and charred flesh.

The three remaining men were engulfed in fire, but to the Canoness's surprise they seemed to take no heed. Two of them raised their spear guns and fired. Grace was hit in the upper chest. Her armour held firm, but the sheer force of the impact was enough to send her staggering. The spear that struck Sister Fayhew rebounded off her pauldron hard enough to leave a dent. The third guard tossed his net at Cairista, who ducked swiftly out of the way.

Sister Fayhew bared her teeth, and squeezed the heavy bolter's firing lever. The men were knocked about like ragdolls as the shells tore them apart. When they were nothing but broken corpses, she released the trigger.

The other Sisters were now racing down the stairs with heavy footfalls. The Canoness raised a hand, and they slowed.

'We are unhurt,' she reassured them. She indicated the dent on Sister Fayhew's shoulder armour.

‘But it would seem that the Shelsists have become more dangerous than ever before.’

‘Canoness, over here!’ Cairista called. She had moved past the dead guards and to the back of the small cellar. There was a gaping hole in the floor, wide enough to fit two grown adults.

The other Sisters gathered around. The Canoness leaned over the hole. By the light of her braziers, she could just barely see the base of the ladder.

‘They were guarding this?’ Superior Tarsha asked.

‘It would seem so,’ Grace replied.

‘Where does it lead?’ Cairista asked.

‘Canoness,’ Tarsha said, ‘I volunteer to find out.’

Grace considered for a moment, and then consented.

Tarsha grasped her boltgun tightly, and jumped through the hole. With a loud splash, she landed in black liquid up to her knees. The air reeked of brine.

She peered about her. She was in a cavern that might have been able to hold, at most, ten people. The rock walls were rough and wet. As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, she was able to make out a doorway, covered with a curtain or heavy blanket of some kind. Around its edges leaked a dim light.

She waited for several seconds. The only sounds were the trickle of water on rock, and the crackling fires above her. She sloshed forward, and tore down the covering with her left hand. It was indeed a blanket, woollen and wet. Before her was a tunnel carved out of the rock. Lumens had been strung along one wall in a drooping chain.

She threw the blanket down. As she entered the mouth of the tunnel, she called up to the Canoness. ‘The base of the ladder is clear. I’m moving—’

Something snapped beneath her boot. Tarsha froze and looked down to see tiny bubbles rising around her legs. She had just enough time to realise that she had triggered some kind of trap, and then there was a gurgling *boom*. Tarsha was hurled up into the air in a spray of sea water. She felt herself strike the roof of the cavern, and then fall back into the pool. She tried to stand up, but found that she could not. She flailed her arms, but couldn’t break above the surface of the water. Seconds ticked by like hours. Then, at last, she felt the strong hands of her sisters grabbing hold of her and lifting her up.

Tarsha blinked and strained to hear. Sister Lygia and Sister Karyn had set her on a rock. The others were talking excitedly and pointing at her, but their voices were muffled. The light from the Canoness’s shoulders made the chamber seem surreal. Her calves felt hot and itchy. That was strange, she thought, because her power armour was internally cooled. She reached a hand down to scratch them, and felt nothing but air. Confused, she looked down to see that her legs were missing from the knees down. Blood was spurting from the mangled stumps in hot streams.

She shook her head in disbelief. Dimly, she remembered stepping on something hidden beneath the water at the mouth of the tunnel. She tried to speak, to warn the others that the Shelsists had laid traps for them, but her tongue could no longer form words. She felt very thirsty, which struck her as funny, since Lysios was a world dominated by its singular ocean. She laughed at the irony.

Her sisters all turned to look at her, their faces etched with worry. The Canoness had knelt down in front of her and was saying something, but Tarsha couldn’t hear properly. A piece of ancient rhyme, something about water everywhere and shrinking boards, drifted through her head. She laughed once more, and died.

The Canoness touched Tarsha’s forehead and finished speaking the Martyr’s Rites. ‘Be favourable and gracious to Your fallen daughter, mighty Emperor, and be pleased with her sacrifice of

righteousness.'

The other Sisters murmured an affirmation. Grace rose and wiped a fist beneath her nose. As a Canoness, she was more than just a military leader to the women serving under her. She was a teacher, a shepherd, a mother. Tarsha had been like a daughter to her, strong in faith and very capable. Grace had been certain that someday she would become a Canoness in her own right. But no longer.

The air was stifled and wet, and for a terrible moment, Grace was reminded of dead Sisters in the sewers beneath the capital city of Dessecran. On that far-away world, five decades past, she had stalked monsters, even as they, in turn, had stalked her. She shook her head. There were no tyrannid monstrosities in these tunnels; no beings from the void come to harvest her for foodstuffs. There were only humans, and false doctrine.

'We have inflicted great damage upon this cult,' she said, 'and it is obvious that they now know and fear us. This is good, my Sisters. The people should know when they have done evil in the Emperor's sight, and they should rightly fear His wrath.' The Canoness drew her sword from its scabbard. Its blade was highly polished silver, the crossguard fashioned to look like a wreath of black flowers.

They followed the lumens and moved down the tunnel at a brisk pace. The Canoness took the lead, carefully watching for additional traps or explosives. It had been no homespun bomb that had killed Tarsha. It had been a military-grade landmine. Where the Shelsists had found such a thing, or who had provided it to them, she knew not. But she vowed never to let it happen again.

They turned sharply to the right, and emerged into a large cave. To their right was a pool of water that lapped against the rock. Stalactites hung like giant fangs from the ceiling. Parts of the ground had been covered with rusted grating. Piles of rubble were heaped up along the walls. At the back of the cavern was a raised area piled high with storage crates. On the rock face above it was a fresco showing Lysios's moon hovering over a tidal wave. Bizarre creatures were emerging from the wave. A small army of stick figures welcomed them with open arms.

The Shelsists were waiting for them. They had flipped over rusted metal tables and chairs, and were taking cover behind them. They were armed not only with harpoons, nets, and spearguns, but also with a collection of clumsy-looking kinetic rifles: a crude technology, but one resilient to Lysios's cyclical flooding.

There was a hooded figure atop the rock ledge. He carried a torch in one hand, and a strange staff in the other. He cried out, and a hail of small-calibre projectiles pummelled the Sisters. They ricocheted off their power armour and tore gaping holes in their vestments. The stone walls behind them shattered into fragments.

The Canoness threw her arm across her face, and felt at least one of the bullets mushroom off her vambrace. Spears whistled past her, or clattered around her feet. Somewhere to her left, there was a wet *smack* and a gurgling sound. She glanced over to see Sister Karyn slump to the ground. She had been pierced through the chest by a harpoon the size of her arm.

'Abominable traitors!' Grace cried. She charged forward, firing her pistol as she went. The chest of one of the nearest Shelsists vaporised as she found her mark.

The other women covered their leader's charge. Bolts crashed into the cultists and punched through their makeshift barricades. Cairista painted the room with white-hot promethium flames.

The cultists directly blocking the Canoness's path were consumed in fire. Their weapons discharged aimlessly as they screamed and flailed. Two of the bullets struck Grace's chestplate and bounced harmlessly away. She vaulted over the table behind which the cultists were cowering, and

mercifully drove her sword through the heart of the man writhing at her feet. The others she left to their sins.

Beneath the fresco, the hooded figure was pointing towards the Canoness and screaming. Grace couldn't make the words out over the cacophony of the heavy bolter, but she could easily guess that he was calling for her murder. Half a dozen Shelsists surrounded him. Two of them were reloading a harpoon launcher ripped from the bow of a whaling ship. The others carried the clumsy autoguns of their forefathers. Grace was fairly certain that the rifles posed little danger to her, but the ballista had felled poor Karyn; it was obviously strong enough to puncture powered armour, and therefore had to be destroyed.

She had taken only a few steps towards their position when they fired upon her. There was nowhere for her to hide, and nothing nearby to take cover behind. So, she simply wheeled around and lowered her head. Bullets fruitlessly struck her back and legs. The harpoon let fly with a sharp *twang*. It impacted her spine with enough force to knock the breath from her lungs, but otherwise, her armour held true.

As they peppered her with bullets, the Canoness holstered her pistol. From her belt, she pulled a golden sphere crowned with a double-headed eagle. She tore the eagle off with her teeth, whirled around, and lobbed the sphere into the cultists' midst.

It detonated among them in a cloud of smoke and biting metal fragments. The Shelsists jerked backwards and ducked. Their armoured suits protected them for the most part, but the Canoness seized upon their confusion. She crossed the distance between them in a few long strides and leapt up to the ledge. She grasped her sword with both hands and swung, forever separating one cultist and his left arm.

Then the others were upon her, beating with the butts of their rifles and stabbing with bayonets. She managed to parry most of them. The rest skittered across her armour harmlessly.

'For the Emperor!' the Canoness screamed. She carved another wide arc, and two of her attackers were sliced clean through. She whirled around and thrust at the man behind her. The sword buried itself through his chest until the garland crosspiece touched his ribs.

The remaining two Shelsists continued to strike at her, but whatever blows they managed to land seemed to have no effect on Grace. The Canoness withdrew her sword as she slammed a spiked elbow plate into one of their faces. The last of her attackers had his head separated from his neck in a single, deft stroke. She faced the robed figure.

No, she saw, it wasn't a robe. Not as such. It was a sheet of waterproof tarpaulin tied around the waist with rope. The sleeves were long and the cowl left his face as a pit of black. He threw down his torch and grasped his staff in both hands. It was thick and knotted, and looked to be made of alabaster stone.

'Murderess!' he cried. His voice was deep and strange, as if his throat was filled with phlegm. 'Look what you have done.'

The Canoness cast a quick glance over her shoulder. She saw that the remaining cultists were either dead or dying. Charred husks that had once been heretics lay scattered everywhere. The crisping of their flesh and tightening of their muscles had drawn each of them up into the foetal position. Sister Fayhew stood before a considerable number of fallen men and women who lay in a wide crescent, limbs twisted and broken. Each had some kind of improvised weapon in their hands. They had tried to charge the Sisters' position, Grace saw, and had failed miserably. Some of the other Sisters were

cut or bleeding, but they stood together, boltguns pointed towards the rocky ledge.

‘It is no less than you deserve for rejecting the Emperor,’ the Canoness said fiercely. She levelled the tip of her sword at the black abyss of his cowl. ‘Now, foulness, tell me where you found these weapons. Tell me why your damned cult refuses to die.’

‘Do not ask us anything,’ the man groaned. ‘The answers will be beyond you.’

In High Gothic, and using her best pulpit voice Grace roared, ‘I will demand of thee, and answer thou me. If you channel a spirit, I would confront it.’

‘What need have we for spirits?’ the man said. ‘We have a goddess.’

With a speed that surprised the Canoness, the man in the robe struck her with the end of his staff. Although her amour was unaffected, she felt the reverberations of the impact. She thrust at him, but the man easily avoided her. She slashed at him twice. Again, he ducked beyond the edge of her blade.

He jabbed the end of his staff into the centre of her chest. Her armour continued to hold, but he twisted it upwards, catching her beneath the chin. She brought her sword downward in a tight curve, and cut deeply into the flesh above his knee. Before he could react, she lunged and drove an elbow into his face.

The man stumbled slightly. His hood fell away, and his robe parted enough for her to see some of what was hidden beneath. Grace drew a sharp intake of breath.

The man’s exposed skin was pale green and had the texture of scales. His nose had either vanished or fallen off, leaving only two thin vertical slits. His left eye was huge and sickly yellow. Small tentacles sprouted from his upper lip and jawline. Most disturbing, however, was the set of additional arms that unstuck themselves from his ribcage. They were thin, but wiry, and ended not in hands but with wickedly tapered claws.

‘Mutation!’ Grace cried.

‘Not mutation,’ the man said, his mouth tentacles twitching, ‘bestowments.’ His secondary claws slashed at her, tearing through the plates protecting her forearms. His strength had become something otherworldly. A line from the Catechism of Leadership raced through her mind: *Since the Emperor suffers to shield us, it is a blessing to suffer for Him in return.*

She impaled him through his lower abdomen. A great stink, like dead fish, erupted from his guts. Still, he did not attempt to flee the fight. Instead, he wrapped his claws around her neck.

‘Hard-hearted, you are, Murderess. Loveless. Chaste by choice.’

The Canoness felt her heart and lungs begin to crumple within her. She fell to her knees, nearly dropping her sword. She couldn’t breathe. The very life was being squeezed out of her. An image flashed through her mind of crushing tentacles, ghostly white, dredged up from the blackest depths of the sea where light had never shone. It felt like drowning. Her vision darkened.

With the last of her strength, she brought her sword up, and cut off his right leg. The man howled as he fell to the ground. Dark ichor splashed everywhere. Coughing, the Canoness dragged herself to her feet.

The man was muttering in his death throes, repeating the same thing over and over.

‘What is that you say?’ Grace demanded.

He smiled up at the Canoness with a look of deranged joy. Blood seeped through the spaces between his teeth.

‘They are coming,’ he said. ‘They are coming at last. They are coming. They are coming at last.’

‘Who? Who is coming?’

The man spasmed once, and said nothing more. His facial tentacles continued to twitch for several seconds after his death.

The Canoness tilted her head thoughtfully as the Sisters moved to join her on the rock ledge. The stakes had suddenly risen here on Lysios. The cult of the Brine Goddess was no longer a collection of malcontents playing at religion and making up stories as they went along. They were gaining in power. They had considerable weapons now. They also had... bestowments. Yes, Grace thought, that was the word the mutant had used. Bestowments. But from whom?

‘Sister,’ she said to Cairista, ‘this man’s flesh has become corrupted. Deliver him from it.’

Cairista brought her weapon up and bathed the man in promethium. The room filled with acrid smoke and the stench of melted plastek.

Later, after Grace had prayed for the souls of Tarsha and Karyn, she would compile a report of this latest encounter with the Shelsists and send it to Terra. For the moment though, she simply stood and watched the Brine Goddess’s favoured burn until there was nothing left of him but ashes.

'I have loved you since the day this world was destroyed. All my life, it seems, I have chased after you. Will you never descend from your abode in the sky? How I long to join you. How I long to touch you... '

– Cantos Continuous, M41

CHAPTER TWO

The inquisitor began the day with his regular regimen: one hour of intensive physical exercise, followed by thirty minutes of sword practice. Breakfast consisted of a conglomeration of proteins and amino acids which he drank greedily from a tall glass. It was as thick as glue and utterly tasteless, but he refused to let the rigours of space travel weaken him in any way. The safety of the Sol System was parsecs behind him now. A new world awaited him, and he would not fall victim to it on account of being too frail or a fraction of a second too slow.

Sweat-covered and dressed only in a loose robe, he pulled down the viewport covering and looked out into space. The ship had emerged from the warp two days ago, and had been steadily decelerating ever since. Yesterday he had ordered a series of torpedo probes launched into the ocean, and their signals had confirmed his hopes. Within the hour, he and his team would be landing on the surface. Then the hunt would begin. Everything was proceeding smoothly. His only regret was that he would be achieving greatness on such an ugly-looking world.

Lysios had to be the most depressing place he had ever seen. Its only natural satellite, Ixoi, was so huge, and orbited so closely, that its gravitational field had distorted the planet into a permanent egg shape. The hemisphere opposite the moon was riddled with tectonic instabilities and fissures. The side closest to the moon was comprised entirely of ocean. It rose like a mountain made of water, kilometres tall. The crests of its waves scraped the stratosphere, and formed icebergs that tumbled down the leese. Moreover, this vertical ocean moved. It took Ixoi a decade to complete a single revolution around Lysios, but as it travelled, it dragged the sea along with it. Thus, there was no place that was not subjected to regular flooding or even total submersion. It was impossible to think that it had once been considered one of the Ninety-Nine Wonders of the Segmentum Solar.

I bet it stinks down there, he thought. Like fish and muck.

He changed into a fresh set of clothes, and surveyed himself in the mirror. When he was satisfied, he opened the antique trunk in which he stored his weapons and equipment. His combat armour, although light, was exquisitely made. He secured his sword belt around his waist, and holstered a pistol beneath his left arm. He double checked to make certain that his refractor field generator was fully charged and operational.

There was a knocking on the bulkhead behind him. Through the door he heard a voice call his name. ‘Inquisitor Ulrich?’

He knew who it was, of course. There was only one woman on board. He strode across the room and opened the door.

In the corridor stood a young woman as tall as he. Her hair was naturally platinum and longer than that of any Sororitas the inquisitor had previously dealt with: a testament to the fact that she spent her life ensconced in scriptoria rather than rolling around on filthy battlefields. Her skin was pale. Her eyes were the colour of jade. Of the rest of her he could make no judgement, as she was covered from neck to ankle by a thick, red scribe’s robe.

‘Sister Margene,’ he said. His nose twitched. She smelled of parchment and ink, which he did not particularly care for.

She held out a thin stack of papers. ‘Inquisitor, I have a readiness report from Tempestor Chavis. He and his men are prepping the two ground transports they brought with them, and await your presence in the loading bay.’

Ulrich left her standing in the corridor while he crossed to his desk. From a fruit bowl, he selected a poperin. It was small and round, and its skin was mottled red and green. He chewed it slowly as he flipped through the report. ‘Would you like to look at it?’

‘I’m sorry?’

He gestured to the window. ‘Lysios. I thought you might like to see it, especially after all the time you’ve spent reading about it.’

‘I would, yes,’ she replied. ‘My quarters have no viewports.’

‘Well, we can’t all travel in first class, now can we?’ Ulrich took another bite of his exotic fruit, and watched closely as Margene crossed over to the window.

‘I have never seen anything like it,’ she said in a near whisper.

‘I would think not,’ Ulrich said. ‘This is your first time away from Terra, yes?’

She dipped her head in reverence at the mention of humanity’s sacred home world, but her eyes never left the strange planet before her. ‘Very true,’ she said. ‘This is not only my first trip to another star system, but my first time beyond the Convent Prioris since my training began as a child.’ She turned her head to look at him. ‘Thank you once again for the opportunity, inquisitor. I will not fail you.’

‘I am a man who remembers his friends. Serve me well on this little outing, and I promise that you will be suitably taken care of.’ He tossed the report down. ‘If I have one regret, it’s that your first journey had to be to such an ugly waste of a world.’

He had hoped that they would share a jest at the planet’s expense, but she frowned.

‘I find nothing wasteful about it, inquisitor,’ she said tartly. ‘In fact, the native Lysites are, if anything, masters of recycling and ingenuity. They’ve been forced to become so, you see, because of the ocean. The “worldwave”, as they call it. The fact that, at any given time, half of the planet is submerged beneath kilometres of salt water has led to the development of a very unique culture.

‘Everything here is tied to the ocean. It’s the source of nearly ninety-five per cent of all foodstuffs. It is also used as a power source, both via various types of tidal generators and as a coolant for nuclear fission reactors. It makes the atmosphere so damp and saline that all machinery demands constant upkeep. Mobility and retrofitting are everything. They must always stay either just ahead or just behind the worldwave, never settling in one place.

‘Take the hab-crawlers, for example. There aren’t really any cities on Lysios any more. Not as you or I might understand it. There are ruins, of course, dating back to the onset of the environmental collapse three millennia ago, but no one lives there. No, instead they move about as I said in massive, tracked machines, each holding thousands of people. Our drop-craft, in fact, will be landing at—’

Ulrich tossed the core of his poperin into the bowl, turned on his heel, and promptly exited into the hallway. The raised soles of his boots made sharp clacking sounds on the metal deck plates. Behind him, Margene rushed to keep pace. Silence stretched out until they neared their destination.

‘The Scion leader... What’s his name again?’

‘Chavis, sir,’ Margene answered. She was unsure if this was a test of some kind, or if he had genuinely forgotten. ‘Tempestor Chavis.’

‘Yes. He and his men have been told little about the reason behind our coming here until now. They’re a very “need to know basis” sort.’

‘But now they need to know.’

‘Correct.’

‘You would like me to tell them about the creature, then?’

‘No. I’ll do that. Just run them through the basic facts.’

They entered into a cavernous space crammed with storage containers and fuel drums. Along the walls were racks where missiles and other armaments were safely stored. The centre of the room was dominated by a pair of oversized ground vehicles. Their armour plating was blocky and angular. Each had a large turret weapon mounted on its roof, and slablike, massively reinforced side hatches. Instead of tyres, the vehicles sat on quad track units. Exhaust pipes jutted out on either side of a frontal engine.

Eighteen men bustled around them. They were all dressed alike, with heavy, pale blue combat armour over beige uniforms. They were tall and fit, with sharply defined features and steely eyes. One of them wore a black beret atop his head, and when Ulrich stood in the doorframe and cleared his throat, it was he who called the others to attention.

‘Thank you, tempestor,’ Ulrich said. ‘Before we begin, gentlemen, there is one formality to get out of the way.’ He pulled a silver cylinder from the inside of his coat, deftly opened the top, and shook out a rolled-up parchment. This he handed to Margene before folding his hands behind his back.

Margene unrolled the scroll, and read aloud in her clearest voice.

‘By the authority of the Immortal Emperor of Mankind, you, the selected members of the Tempestus Scions 55th regiment, also known as the Kappic Eagles, are hereby required to submit yourselves wholly and unquestioningly to His servant, Inquisitor Damien Ulrich for a mission to be determined by the inquisitor and whose objectives and implementation will be divulged by the inquisitor at a time and place of the inquisitor’s choosing.

‘Failure of any man to comply constitutes heresy against the Ecclesiarchy, and will render said heretic *persona non grata excommunicatus* in the eyes of the Emperor.

‘Here follows the signature of Inquisitor Damien Ulrich, dated 0712999.M41.’

Margene turned the scroll around so that the soldiers could clearly see for themselves the elaborate scrawl across the bottom. A purity seal of red wax, stamped with the symbol of the Inquisition, rested next to it. When they had nodded their acceptance, she rolled it back up and glanced at Ulrich.

‘You have been given a wonderful opportunity,’ he said, rocking slightly on his heels. ‘Very shortly, we will descend to the planet Lysios. The mission is quite straightforward. It’s the environment that

may complicate things.’

Taking her cue, Margene stepped forward.

‘Until M38, Lysios was a populous and productive Imperial world. Then, for reasons unknown, the binary stars at the heart of this system began a period of increased activity. The environment on Lysios changed radically, and within a year, the planet suffered a class-5 environmental collapse. Both of its ice caps melted and created a new ocean, which was pulled into a central location thanks to the gravitational influence of Lysios’s single natural satellite, Ixoi. The ocean now trails behind the moon as it orbits, completing one revolution every ten local years. The surviving native populations have, over the past three millennia, developed a trio of heretical pagan belief-systems stemming from this catastrophe.

‘First are the followers of Cryptus. Cryptus is an angry sky god, and according to those who believe in him, the twin suns are his hate-filled eyes. Cryptus burns everything he gazes upon, and smites those who disrespect him with various cancers.’

Behind her, Ulrich snorted.

‘In actuality,’ Margene continued, ‘Lysios does boast both a very high UV rating, and an abundance of gamma particles at ground level. Everyone involved in this mission has been issued a supply of satyx, an anti-rad elixir. Take it daily, or face the consequences.

‘Secondly, there is the moon. Ixoi, as he is known to the locals, is a warrior. He also loves to eat, as evidenced by his great size. His worshippers are few on Lysios, but are very dangerous. They spend their lives as nomadic raiders, attacking hab-crawlers and making off with all the food supplies they can lay their hands on.

‘Third is the so-called “Goddess of the Brine”, Shelse. According to the mythos, the ocean goddess is in love with the moon, and follows him everywhere. She reaches up as high as she can towards Ixoi, but is never able to touch him. This makes her angry, and so she causes storms and floods.

‘In 998.M41, the Ecclesiarchy began a mission of repatriation on Lysios, under the command of–’

Ulrich cut her off with a clap of his hands. ‘It’s the third of these so-called deities that concerns us. The records are spotty, but it would seem that when the moon is at perigee, a creature of unknown origin can be seen rising up out of the worldwave.’

‘What do we know of its capabilities?’ Tempestor Chavis asked.

‘Almost nothing. There are no known pict of it, nor any vid-pict recordings. What there are in plenty, however, are paintings and drawings. It seems the people who worship this thing find a particular joy in depicting it.’

‘I have several examples on file,’ Margene offered. ‘I will of course provide them to you.’

Chavis paid her no heed. ‘How would you like to proceed, inquisitor?’

‘My plan is this: the worldwave is currently passing through the Kephorous mountain range. We will ascend to the top of Mount Loraz, whose plateau should put us near the upper third of the wave. We will establish a base camp, and when the tidal swell is greatest, we will lure the creature to shore.’

‘How?’ Chavis asked.

The inquisitor smiled slyly. ‘Leave that to me.’

The tempestor rubbed his chin in thought. ‘These worshippers you speak of, are they numerous? Dangerous?’

Margene answered before Ulrich could. ‘There has been a concentrated effort to put them down for

nearly a year now,' she said. 'It is still ongoing.'

Ulrich put his hands in his coat pockets. 'I wouldn't worry too much about the Shelsists. I doubt they're any match for trained and properly equipped soldiers.'

'What I mean to say, sir, is do you expect them to attempt to stop us?'

'Stop you from doing what?'

'From destroying the thing they revere.'

Shaking his head, Ulrich walked slowly up to Chavis. 'Although I appreciate your enthusiasm, tempestor, you and your men are not here to destroy the creature. You are here to capture it.'

CHAPTER THREE

The inquisitor and his retinue descended to the planet's surface in a boxy landing craft. Margene and the Scions were crammed into the cargo hold along with the pair of armoured vehicles. Chavis and Ulrich occupied the cockpit. As they passed through the cloud layer, the inquisitor drew an undecorated black handkerchief from the inside pocket of his coat. Carefully, he unfolded the corners. Wrapped inside was a stack of seventy-eight crystalline wafers that resembled a deck of cards etched in glowing glass. Ulrich shifted the deck to his other hand, and began to shuffle it.

Ulrich had always aspired to be someone of great import. He had worked ferociously to gain the attention of the Inquisition, and once he had it, he pushed himself even harder to gain entrance into their ranks. The authority he now held was vast. Still, it did not entirely satisfy, for within the Inquisition itself, there were hierarchies. For years, he had tried everything he could think of to promote himself, to win favour, to be inducted into the ranks of the Inquisitor Lords. He had failed.

Then he discovered the reports.

It had happened quite by accident. Ulrich had been in a vault of the Ordo Xenos, the Imperial agency tasked with identifying and countering the threat of the alien, desperately searching for a hint, a clue, anything that might let him discover an entirely new xenos life form. He envisioned dragging the carcass of some titanic beast back to Terra, throwing it down in triumph before his masters, and defying them to discount him any longer. Unfortunately, it seemed that everything had already been discovered or exterminated. He was close to despair, when he happened to come across a series of data-slates. To a casual observer, they were nothing: a series of field reports from a Battle Sister Canoness on the planet Lysios who was apparently having trouble eliminating a cult of heretics. Printed into the margins, however, were annotations written in a perfect, almost dainty hand. It was the excellence of the penmanship which caught his attention, and their content which held it.

The side notes proposed that the heretics might be influenced by an actual creature of unknown or alien origin. Ulrich tracked down the commentator, and discovered Sister Margene. She was alone and working by candlelight in a vault filled to overflowing with books and files. She was only too happy to expound upon her theories, and showed the inquisitor legends and observations dating back three thousand years. Ulrich became convinced that he had finally found a means to promotion.

He stopped shuffling and held the crystal cards face down. His fingers hovered over the deck.

‘Will I find what I am searching for here on Lysios?’ he whispered.

He flipped the topmost wafer, and smiled. Depicted on the reverse side was the Emperor, seated like a mummified corpse upon His Golden Throne, screaming silently for all the galaxy to hear.

‘Warp travel, discovery, and hope amongst the stars,’ Ulrich said, taking it to be a good omen. He placed the card back, flipped the entire deck over, and began to wrap it back up in its protective cloth.

He paused for a moment. The card on the bottom showed a planet, cracked apart like an egg. Chunks of it were tumbling off into the void of space. It was number fifty-two in the Emperor’s Tarot: the Shattered World. It signified monumental events, conflict on an enormous scale.

Is this a portent? he wondered.

Tempestor Chavis’s voice crackled through vox-speakers throughout the lander. ‘Stand by, Scions, we are on final approach.’

The lander began banking in a long curve. Ulrich craned his head. They were through the clouds now. The land stretched away barren and brown in nearly every direction. To the west, the horizon lurched vertically in a wall of dark blue. Directly below was what appeared to be a large town. It was square and flat, with low buildings the colour of rust.

When Ulrich had finished wrapping up his cards, he returned the bundle to its resting place above his heart. If the tarot was trying to warn him of something, he decided, it was to beware the ugliness of the world outside the window.

He pushed up his left sleeve. Wrapped around his arm was a data display of exquisite quality. A series of numbers flashed on its emerald screen. He nodded in approval. The data from the torpedo probes hadn’t changed. They had delivered their radioactive payload into the worldwave, and it had been absorbed by something big. The creature was real all right, and now, he would be able to find her with ease.

Ulrich pushed his sleeve back down. He checked his faded reflection in the window, adjusted his cravat, and then made his way down to the lander’s main deck.

The shuttlecraft lurched and came to rest. Ulrich was the first to exit, followed closely by Margene. Behind them, the inquisitor could hear Chavis barking orders for his men to begin deploying themselves.

The first thing that struck him was not the smell, as he had thought, but the light. It was early afternoon on this part of Lysios. Everything was bathed in oversaturated, crimson hues. He squinted and made a shade with his right hand. Purple and yellow spots formed in his vision, and he blinked to clear them. The lander sat in the centre of a square area barely large enough to contain it. Three sides were hedged in by storage buildings with only the vaguest memories of having once been painted. In one corner was a four-storey tower with large glass windows on the top floor and a satellite dish mounted on the roof. A chain-link fence cordoned off the remaining side. Through the haze, Ulrich could make out the silhouettes of people there.

‘Angry sun god indeed, yes?’ he quipped, turning to Margene.

‘Sir?’ The young woman was unaffected by the blinding double suns. She’d had the forethought to bring a pair of tinted goggles.

‘Nothing.’ Ulrich sighed. He looked down at his boots. ‘Is the ground vibrating?’

‘It’s the crawler treads, inquisitor. This entire settlement is moving, if you recall.’

‘And it does this all the time?’

‘Constantly, albeit very slowly. It takes each crawler ten years to circumnavigate the planet. If it stayed still, it would eventually be swept away by the worldwave.’

‘How annoying.’ He looked about. ‘Where is our reception?’

He dropped his hand and began to walk towards the fence. His sword banged against his leg. His coat tails ruffled behind him. He was halfway to his destination when a section of the fence drew back. He stopped. Marching towards him was a group of Battle Sisters. They wore white power armour and black cloaks. They were led by an intimidating middle-aged woman whose most distinguishing feature was the scar that ran down one side of her face.

Pursing his lips and frowning, he muttered, ‘And what have we here?’

‘Inquisitor?’ the woman called out. Her voice was as loud and as clear as a chapel bell.

Margene gave an audible intake of breath.

‘I am,’ Ulrich said. He rested his hands on the pommel of his sword, and shifted his weight onto one leg. ‘Who might you be?’

The Battle Sisters came to halt. ‘I am Magda Grace, a Canoness for the Sisters of the Sacred Rose.’

‘You may address me as Inquisitor Ulrich. This is Sister Margene. She’ll be acting as my dialogus.’

Margene nodded curtly.

‘Very good,’ the Canoness said approvingly. ‘Inquisitor Ulrich, it falls to me to bid you welcome to Lysios.’

‘Falls to you? Why? Where is the planetary governor?’

‘Governor Strachman has abandoned his post,’ the Canoness said.

‘Are you certain?’ Ulrich asked. ‘I wasn’t aware of any such problems when I left Terra.’

Canoness Grace was steadfast. ‘I can assure you, sir, that Governor Strachman and everyone attached to him have been *in absentia* for quite some time. Not long after we began our campaign against the Shelsists, he vanished and has not been seen since. The only conclusion can be that he is a heretic, and that he chose to flee our wrath.’

‘I see. Well then, where is the commander of the local military forces?’

Margene leaned forward again. ‘Inquisitor, Lysios has no indigenous regiment.’

‘What?’

‘There hasn’t been an Imperial Guard unit on this world in three thousand years, inquisitor. Not since the environmental collapse.’

‘Governor Strachman had a few units of professional soldiers who acted as his personal guard,’ Canoness Grace offered, ‘but they went into hiding with him. Until such time as he and his people are found and dealt with, you may consider Lysios to be under my control.’

Ulrich stared at her. ‘So, you and a dozen Sororitas are the only Imperial authority on this world?’

‘Myself and several thousand Battle Sisters, yes,’ the canoness said, emphasising the true number.

For a moment, the only sounds on the landing field were the whistling of the wind and the distant sounds of the Scions’ transports rumbling slowly out of the belly of the lander. Ulrich squeezed his eyes tightly, but when he opened them again, he still felt blinded.

‘You will get used to the light here,’ Canoness Grace offered.

‘Thank you, but I won’t be staying that long. In fact, I must be about my business.’

‘You should be made aware, then, that my Sororitas are heavily involved in combating the three local heretical cults. If you plan to conscript some of them under the authority of the Immortal

Emperor of Mankind, then our overall efforts to restore this planet will suffer.’

‘I have no intention of taking your Sisters away from their duties. I have Tempestus Scions to assist me in my mission.’

‘Scions? Is it not a waste of their particular skillsets to use them only to ferret out and destroy heretical cultists?’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘The Shelsists, of course.’

‘What of them?’

The Canoness frowned. ‘I presumed that as an officer of the Ordo Hereticus, you were here to offer us your assistance in purging them.’

‘No, not at all,’ Ulrich said.

‘The inquisitor is of the Ordo Xenos, Canoness,’ Margene said quietly.

‘Xenos?’

Tempestor Chavis had made his way towards the group. He stopped behind the inquisitor, stamped the ground, and saluted.

‘Sir, all men and materiel are safely groundside. Taurox transports are armed and ready, and awaiting your orders.’

‘Very well. Sister Margene and I will travel with you in the lead vehicle. I’ll decode our destination coordinates once we are under way,’ Ulrich said. He gave a slight bow at the waist. ‘Canoness, I’ll take my leave.’

‘One cannot take what is so freely given,’ the Canoness said.

Ulrich narrowed his eyes. Her words sounded like a quotation of some kind. Uncertain as to whether or not he had actually been insulted by the woman, he simply gave her a slight bow. He took four steps towards the landing craft, and then spun back around. ‘Oh, actually, there is one area in which you and your charges might be of assistance to me.’

‘Yes, inquisitor?’

Ulrich pointed towards the fence, where a number of curious onlookers were gathering. ‘Keep the local riff-raff away from this ship. Set up a perimeter, or some such.’

Canoness Grace’s eyes went wide with incredulity. ‘Guard duty? You want to use my Battle Sisters for guard duty?’

‘The Emperor’s Inquisition is tasking you with securing a valuable location,’ Ulrich said. He watched her clench her jaw. It could be a dangerous thing, he knew, trumping someone’s personal pride with Inquisitorial power. But damn if it wasn’t satisfying.

‘Your lander will be accorded the same level of security as that of any Imperial visitor to this world,’ the Canoness growled.

The inquisitor returned to the Scions with Chavis. Margene bowed to Canoness Grace in a gesture of respect mingled with awe. ‘It was an honour to meet you at last, Canoness.’

The Canoness gave her a quizzical look.

‘I am stationed at the Convent Prioris, on Holy Terra. I have been the recipient of your progress reports. I know all about your struggles here on Lysios, particularly against the Shelsists.’

‘But it’s not them that brought you here.’

Margene seemed torn. ‘I... I cannot speak of the inquisitor’s mission. I am bound by an oath of servitude and secrecy. We all are.’

‘Of course. I understand.’

‘But I can say that I think our efforts will aid you greatly. If we are successful, that is.’

Margene backed away, and then ran to catch up with Ulrich and Chavis. Canoness Grace returned to the other Sisters.

‘Superior Cairista, we have new orders. This field is to be secured and guarded until the inquisitor returns. No one goes near that landing craft, and we are to keep any and all citizens away from the entryway. See to it.’

‘At once, Canoness,’ Cairista replied. As part of her promotion, she had traded in her flamer for a boltgun with a small fire launcher mounted beneath it. She hoisted it up over her shoulder and began to issue commands to the other women.

Grace watched from a distance as the Scions, Ulrich and Sister Margene climbed into the two transports and rumbled away from the tiny space port. Overhead, the blazing eyes of Cryptus became obscured by wisps of blue cloud. A cool breeze ruffled her cloak.

Canoness Grace ran her fingers along the beads of the rosarius that hung around her neck, praying as she did so. ‘Emperor, if it be Your will, watch over our sister, Margene. Grant her strength, and courage, and the conviction to do Your will in all things.’ She touched her forehead, chest, and sword hilt, and then moved to supervise the establishment of the security perimeter.

She and Margene would never see each other in person again.

'I am the Brine. Everything that lives within me, I have made a part of me. Since you spurn me, Ixoi, the creatures of Lysios will suffer my wrath. I will devour them, and greatly. The things that live in me will feast upon the things that live outside of me, because without you, I am craven.'

– *Cantos Continuous*, M41

CHAPTER FOUR

Chavis was not his original name. It had been given to him twenty years previously, by a drill abbot who selected it from a long list of possibilities. He had been twelve years old at the time, the victim of a disaster he couldn't recall which had taken place on a home world he could no longer remember. One of a hundred boys brought before the Schola Progenium that day, he had been sprayed with a hose, deloused, and told to forget everything about his past. This included his name. His name was Chavis now.

'You should be proud,' they had told him. 'Each of the names on this list once belonged to a great hero of the Imperium. This man, Chavis, was known for his wisdom and commitment to success. Now, it's up to you to carry on his legacy.'

He did his best to comply, and he did feel proud to have been awarded such a name. He even enjoyed the brutal rigours of training, remaining stoically silent through aching muscles and the occasional snapped bone. Suffering became the price to be paid for the honour of bearing the name of Chavis.

He did not, however, enjoy the Correction Throne.

It was a standard phase in the development of a Tempestus Scion. All of them would go through it. He accepted that much. What he would never understand was why such a terrible thing was given such an elegant name. He had imagined a magnificent chair, like the one the Emperor sat in, but when he was at last brought before it, he found it to be nothing of the kind. The Correction Throne was a metal frame with leather straps around the arms and legs. Suspended above was what appeared to be a bowl filled with spikes. He was forced into the seat. Rough hands cinched the belts tightly around his limbs. The bowl was placed over his head. A block of wood was inserted into his mouth to ensure that he didn't bite through his tongue. Adepts in hooded robes, lurking in the dark corners of the room, muttered as they flipped switches and turned dials.

Then, like a billion young lads before him, he was mindscaped. The needles drove themselves through the back of his skull. The soft pathways of his brain were flooded with a neurochemical designed to wipe them clean. When he was at last allowed to rise from the Throne, his mind would be an empty vessel, fit to be filled with all the terrible doctrines of war. And fill it they did.

Two decades later, Chavis knew how to achieve any mission given to him. He knew when to take ground, and when to hold it; when to act with caution, and when to risk it all. And thus, despite the inquisitor's unparalleled power and authority over him, Chavis was unafraid to question his decisions.

From the hab-crawler, the two transports sped easily over kilometres of barren and empty country. Above them, the skies darkened. Thunder could be heard even through the thick hull. By the time they entered the foothills of the Kephorous mountains, a deluge was coming down around them. Rain beat against the roof and firing ports, and the Taurox rocked from side to side as the independent tracks scabbled over rocks and crevasses.

‘Is there a problem, tempestor?’ Margene asked.

Chavis's head snapped up. ‘Why do you ask?’

The interior of the Taurox was divided into two sections. There was a piloting compartment up front, with room enough for two people. The remainder was a rectangular space large enough to hold eight. Chavis and Margene were seated directly across from one another.

‘The way you were staring down at the floor,’ Margene said. Her face was hard. A boltgun rested in her lap, and she drummed her fingers on its engraved frame.

‘The rain sounds very heavy,’ Chavis said. ‘I'm concerned that it may affect our timetable.’

‘Storms are common on Lysios, especially as one moves closer to the worldwave. They tend not to last long, but can be intense. It's actually a bit ironic, because right now, on the other side of the planet, there's a terrible drought.’

Abruptly, the vehicle came to a halt. Chavis leaned forward in his seat and called up to the piloting compartment.

‘Scion Cato, report!’

‘Tempestor,’ Cato replied calmly, ‘we have a potential problem.’

Chavis unbuckled his safety restraints and leaned in between the driver and forward passenger seats.

‘What is it?’ Chavis asked.

Cato pointed through the narrow window slot before him. ‘There are environmental concerns that should be evaluated before we proceed, sir.’

‘All right. Let's have a look.’ Chavis activated his personal vox-unit and called to the driver of the second Taurox. ‘Erdon, join us up front.’

He returned to the rear section, shoved one of the side doors open, and jumped down into water that rose to his ankles. Behind him, he heard Cato and the inquisitor do likewise. Rain pelted his face. It tasted vaguely of salt.

They were half way up the slope of Mount Loraz, following a winding track barely wide enough to accommodate their transports. On the left rose a wall of rock and mud. To the right was a sharp drop-off that plunged hundreds of metres into the churning greenish waves of Lysios's ocean. To fall over the edge was to fall into oblivion.

From behind them came the sound of sloshing footsteps.

‘Scion Erdon, reporting as ordered.’

Chavis adjusted his beret and the four of them made their way to the front of the lead Taurox. They stood in the glare of the vehicle's floodlights and surveyed the path ahead of them.

‘Damn,’ Ulrich said. He began fishing about inside his coat.

A river of rainwater, a hundred metres wide, was gushing from a crevasse in the mountainside. It fell in a torrent across the road before spilling over the drop-off.

‘No way to know what condition the road is in under all that,’ Erdon said to Cato.

‘That’s the concern.’

Chavis moved forward slowly, testing the ground with every step.

‘Can you tell how deep it gets, sir?’ Erdon called out. The water was now swirling around the tempestor’s knees.

‘Deep. But I shouldn’t think that it’ll come up over the roof.’

Behind him, Ulrich had produced a square of paper laminated in plastek. He began to unfold it. ‘We can’t go through this,’ he said. ‘We’ll be swept over the edge for certain.’

‘I’ve been through wider water hazards,’ Chavis said. He looked out at the drop-off. ‘We’ll be fine.’

Ulrich lowered the sheet of paper. Chavis could see that it was a map of some kind, possibly part of an orbital survey. ‘I beg to differ. Look here, this shows another way to the plateau.’

The tempestor returned to Ulrich’s side and grasped one edge of the waterproofed sheet. After a moment’s consideration, he said, ‘No. That won’t work.’

Ulrich looked as if he’d been slapped, and Chavis wondered distantly how often the inquisitor, or any inquisitor for that matter, found himself being contradicted. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Respectfully, sir, it won’t work. Not given our time considerations.’ He traced a line over the map with a thick finger, leaving a trail of condensation. ‘The other route is kilometres to the west. True, it’s not as steep, but it would take us half a day to get there. By that time, we will have missed our opportunity.’

Ulrich looked unhappy. He pointed to the water pouring down across the trail. ‘You’re telling me that you can get us through that?’

‘Sir, I have twenty years of service to my name. I’ve yet to encounter the terrain that could best a Taurox.’

‘But if the road gives way beneath it...’

‘Sir,’ Chavis repeated. ‘If we want to capture the alien specimen, we need to stick to our timetable.’ He held up his right forearm, into which was built a small, glowing display screen. He wiped the beads of rainwater from it, and tilted it towards Ulrich. In the upper corner of the display, a string of numbers counted steadily down towards zero. ‘According to the information provided to me by the dialogus, we have just under four hours remaining. After that, the tidal swell of the worldwave will have moved past the mountain.’

Ulrich looked at Cato and Erdon, as if seeking a second opinion. He found none.

‘I also have many years of experience, tempestor,’ Ulrich said, ‘in a profession that rewards carelessness with death.’

Chavis gave no reply. Twice he had stated his belief that the two Taurox would be able to make it across the raging water, and that was one time more than he was used to. Finally, Ulrich relented. He shook the water from the map, and began to fold it back up. ‘If you have so much faith in this machine of yours, then you won’t mind driving.’

‘Not at all, sir. However, I’ll need Scion Cato to sit next to me.’

‘Why?’

‘This could be dangerous, sir. Not only should there be a Scion ready to take over immediately should something happen to me, but you will be safer in the rear section.’

‘Fine, fine,’ Ulrich muttered. His shoulders were hunched and his arms were wrapped tightly around his body. His hair was plastered to his head by the rain. He climbed up into the passenger compartment.

Chavis and Cato made their way to the front. As Chavis fastened his safety restraints, Cato secured his helmet and faceplate.

‘Scion Erdon?’ Chavis said over the vox.

‘Ready here, tempestor. We’ll follow your lead.’

Chavis sent the Taurox forwards. Four status lights blinked on the panel in front of him, one for each of the machine’s quad tracks. The moment they entered the torrent, the lights changed from reassuring green to cautionary amber. Water surged against the left side of the vehicle. The Taurox began to lurch up and down as it manoeuvred over submerged boulders, but its grip on the flooded road was steady.

As they neared the midpoint, the front of the transport suddenly pitched down sharply. Chavis’s viewing slits became completely submerged.

‘What was that?’ Cato said.

Chavis bared his teeth, angry with himself for not having foreseen this. ‘A trench,’ he said. The constant rush of water had carved a deep fault in the mountain path, and they were falling into it, nose-first.

Erdon was shouting over the vox. ‘Tempestor, I’ve lost you!’

‘Erdon, exercise extreme caution. The middle section here is far worse than I thought.’

Chavis flicked a series of switches on the panel beside him, and the interior lights in the Taurox went out as power was transferred to the tractors. He pulled back hard on the controls. From somewhere underfoot came the noise of metal grinding. The Taurox shook violently and groaned before bursting up to the surface again, spraying mud everywhere. The water levels dropped back down below the firing slots. They were nearly to the other side.

As Chavis looked again at the track indicators, something heavy struck the side of the Taurox and rolled away. The passenger compartment reverberated with the sound of it. The tempestor’s head snapped up.

‘Rock, sir,’ Cato said. ‘Fell down from the mountainside after we passed through. I think maybe we—’

Through the vox, Chavis could suddenly hear a series of pings and bangs. At first, he took it to be gunfire of some kind.

‘Tempestor, I have a situation,’ Erdon said. ‘We’re being pushed over the drop-off.’

Cato let out a short, sharp expletive.

‘Transfer additional power to your tracks,’ Chavis ordered.

‘They’re at one hundred and twenty per cent, sir. It’s not a question of power. There’s nothing left to grip.’

Ulrich leaned into the compartment and demanded to know what was happening.

Chavis cut him off with a raised hand. ‘Erdon,’ he said, ‘prep your recovery gear. Cato, get outside, grab that line and secure it.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Cato said. Mounted into his left shoulder plate was a compact vid-lens. When he

activated it, the lens glowed dark red. Chavis looked down at his own forearm display, which now showed the view from Cato's vid-link. 'Your monoscope data is coming in fine. Go.'

'I asked you to tell me what's happening,' Ulrich said. 'All of our equipment is in that other transport. If it's lost—'

'Not now!' Chavis raised his arm.

Beside him, Cato reached up and unlocked a small round hatch. Rain and muddy water poured into his lap. He reached down beside his seat and pulled hard on the lever there, and with a sudden jerk, his chair rose up through the open hatch. The water coming into the front compartment slowed to only a few drops. On his monitor, Chavis could now see the road ahead, as well as the barrels of the battle cannon mounted on the roof of the Taurox. The picture inched around as Cato climbed up from out of the turret and made his way on hands and knees to the back of the roof.

'Erdon,' Chavis called, 'fire your cable.'

A moment later, there was a scraping sound on the roof, and Cato said, 'They're latched on to us. We're good to go, tempestor.'

Chavis pushed down on the accelerator, and the transport lurched forwards. Over the vox, Chavis could hear Cato grunting. After several tense moments, Erdon spoke.

'That's it. All of my track indicators are back on solid ground.'

The two vehicles ploughed through the last of the water and emerged safely on the other side. The seat next to Chavis dropped back down into place. Cato, covered in mud and soaking wet, removed his helmet and facemask. He exhaled loudly. 'The cable's released, sir.'

Ulrich was staring at him. 'Your hands,' he said.

Cato had left a pair of bloody imprints on either side of his helmet. He turned his gloves over to discover that several thick metal splinters had embedded themselves in his palms. 'Oh. Must have gotten them from the recovery cable.' He looked up at Chavis. 'It gave me a bit of trouble, sir.'

'Good work, Scion,' Chavis said. 'Get in the back and get those cleaned up.'

Cato nodded and squeezed past the inquisitor.

'I thought you said that we wouldn't have any problems?' Ulrich said.

Chavis switched off the vid-feed to his monitor. The tiny clock reappeared and continued its countdown. 'No, sir, I said that we would make it, and we did.'

'But I was right. The road washed out.'

'The road didn't wash out. The mountain came down.'

Ulrich's mouth twisted. 'Just get us up to the plateau,' he said quietly. He turned and went back into the rear compartment.

CHAPTER FIVE

By the time they reached the top of the mountain, the rain had stopped. The clouds were beginning to thin. The suns had set and the moon, Ixoi, was already visible in the sky as a massive, round, red disc. Nearby, the waves of Lysios's vertical ocean washed up on the tumbled rocks. Their sound was like thunder, and the spray they sent up plumed high overhead. The two Taurox had stopped near a large slab of flat rock. Ulrich had insisted on being the first to exit. He stood gazing out at the ocean with a strange look on his face. Margene and the eighteen Scions climbed down from the transports and began to gather near him.

The bulk of the worldwave was to the south of them, a dark wall reaching up into the clouds. The dusky moonlight only made it seem more surreal. The entire horizon appeared to bend at a ninety-degree angle.

Ulrich turned and faced them all. His eyes were alight with excitement. The wind whipped his coat around his calves. He had to shout to be heard over the pounding surf.

'I told you men before we landed that I had a plan to make our target come to us. Sister Margene, according to local legend, how often does the Brine Goddess come to the surface?'

'Monthly, sir. She reaches out towards the moon, and when she finds that she can't touch him, she despairs and causes tidal waves and storms.'

'Nonsense, obviously, but it did get me to thinking. If there really was a Shelse living in the blackness of the ocean, why would it come forth with such regularity? I believe that the answer is the moon. Well, moonlight, to be more exact. I mean, look around you.'

Ulrich swept his arm in a half circle. Ixoi dominated the sky, casting everything in the reflection of the two suns. No stars could be seen. Night-time on Lysios was the equivalent of dusk on most other Imperial worlds.

'You believe the creature is attracted to light?' Margene asked.

'Light and gravity, but I'm willing to wager that light will be enough. Tempestor, I want your men to begin setting up the searchlight immediately. How long will it take?'

'It's a standard Sabre platform, sir. Routine assembly time twenty-five to thirty minutes. We'll have it ready in fifteen.'

‘Excellent. In the meantime, I will prepare the containment chamber. Margene, you’re with me.’ Ulrich began to walk towards the Taurox that Erdon had driven. Margene hurried to match his long strides. Chavis barked to the Scions. ‘You heard the inquisitor. Unpack that platform. Get the light up and running.’

The Scions saluted, and hurried to their work. From the rear section of the second Taurox, they brought out four metal struts and a series of round floor plates. These were followed by a square bracket, and finally, a light that was nearly as wide around as Chavis was tall. Margene had seen such things before. The light they produced was blinding, and they were usually mounted onto buildings or used for signalling aircraft at night. Once the pieces of the searchlight were offloaded, the Taurox was empty save for her, Ulrich, and a tall cylinder.

It appeared to be made of sheet metal. The front contained a single narrow door with a round pane of glass in the centre.

‘You’re going to put it... in this?’ Margene asked.

‘It’s stronger than it looks, I assure you. Heavier, as well. Take one side.’

She shouldered her boltgun and helped Ulrich lift the container out of the Taurox and down onto the ground. The Scions had nearly finished assembling the platform and the massive light. She had thought perhaps the tempestor had been bragging when he said that he and his men could build it in half the time of regular soldiers. Now, she conceded that he hadn’t.

The waves were growing in intensity as the tidal swell approached. Their breaking on the rocks was deafening, and when the waves retreated, they seemed to suck the very air out to sea with them. Margene looked in awe at the approaching worldwave, when something farther down the shoreline caught her attention. In the distance was a procession of people. They were carrying torches.

‘Inquisitor?’ she said. ‘We’re not alone.’

Ulrich looked down the strand. ‘Who are they?’

‘Locals, I would presume, sir. Should we do something about them?’

Before he could answer, Chavis approached. ‘We’re ready, inquisitor,’ he said.

‘Turn it on, then.’

Chavis gave a signal to one of his men, and the searchlight flared to life. Its blinding beam cut a wide swath down the beach and far out into the ocean. Another wave crashed over the rocks, dousing everyone with droplets of freezing water. The searchlight crackled and hissed.

Chavis frowned. ‘Sir,’ he asked Ulrich, ‘are you certain that we’re high enough above the water line?’

‘Of course.’

Margene did not share the inquisitor’s confidence, especially not after yet another wave crested the rocks and travelled far enough up the shore to wet their boots. Green tendrils like fine seaweed, embedded with flecks of silver, glittered on the ground. Droplets popped loudly as they landed on the light and then vaporised.

Scion Cato was the first to notice that the torch bearers had altered their course and were now moving towards them. ‘Tempestor!’ he shouted.

‘Byrdgon, Savdra!’ Chavis ordered. The two Scions quickly left the searchlight to stand by Erdon. From their backs, the three men unhooked bulky lasguns with top-mounted scopes and thick barrels.

The group of torch bearers came to a halt a short distance from the Scions. They were led by a woman in her late thirties. She wore a blue, patchwork robe and tall boots. She carried a staff that

seemed to be made from some kind of white stone. Her skin was burnt and wrinkled from a lifetime under the twin suns of Lysios.

‘You shouldn’t be here!’ she shouted. ‘Whoever you are, you must leave.’

Ulrich put his hands on his hips. ‘Do you have any idea who I am?’

The woman stopped and planted the end of her staff in the rocky soil. Something about the gnarled white pole stuck a familiar chord with Margene. It wasn’t stone, she realised, but a huge rod of coral.

‘This night is sacred, off-worlder. You will not defile it.’

‘What did you call me?’

‘Off-worlder,’ she drawled in a thick accent. ‘Like the Murderess.’

The crowd behind her murmured.

Ulrich seemed slightly amused. ‘I’m sorry, who is the Murderess?’

‘The one who leads the women in white.’

‘You mean the Canoness? Does she know you call her that?’

The ocean roared. The Lysites turned, to see the crest of an enormous wave rolling towards them in a spray of water and foam. Strange creatures began to tumble out of it. Fish the size of small children flopped about. More of the glittering seaweed covered the shore. Margene unslung her bolter.

‘You must douse this light!’ cried the woman in the blue robe. ‘Only Ixoi may shine this night!’

Ulrich neither knew nor cared what she was talking about. He was about to order the Scions to chase the Lysites off with a volley of las-fire, when another wave pounded the nearby rocks. A large boulder rolled up onto the shore, and sprouted four pairs of stocky, segmented legs. A head shaped like a hammer uncurled from somewhere beneath it. Two antennae emerged from its neck and twitched as they took in the night-time air.

One of the old Lysite men broke from the group and ran towards it with all the speed he could muster. ‘Me first, take me!’ he shouted as he went.

‘Orders, sir?’ Chavis asked.

The boulder-thing pounced forward. Margene caught a glimpse of a fanged mouth on its underside.

Ulrich dug furiously into his coat pocket, and whipped out a hand-held auspex. He pointed it towards the creature. When it made a short, sharp buzz, he scowled. ‘It’s not what we’re after. Kill it.’

Chavis barked to two of his men. ‘Thieus, Brandt, directed firestorm.’

The pair’s hot-shot lasguns lit up the stony beach with searing beams. The creature was struck, and a section of its rocky shell melted inward. It gave a high pitched squeal, and fell over dead. Its insides were on fire.

The old man who had been running skidded to a halt and fell to his knees before the carcass. He stared in disbelief. There was no sound for a moment except the pounding of the surf. The Lysites were slack-jawed and silent. Then the old man lifted his arms out towards the worldwave and began to wail.

‘I was prepared!’ he cried.

As if taking a cue from his outburst, the body of the dead creature shuddered. From somewhere inside it there came a tearing sound. A swarm of tiny things flooded out from underneath its burning shell, each a copy of the parent creature in miniature. They surged over the wailing man and began biting into his flesh. He collapsed beneath them.

Margene could have sworn that his cries had changed from sorrow to gratitude.

Ulrich took a step back in disgust. Another titanic wave arched over the boulders and came crashing down, soaking everyone and leaving more creatures in its wake. They dragged themselves up the shore on a pair of rubbery fins, while behind them a flat tail wagged. Their backs were covered in long spines that faced forward. They shook themselves off, sending a cloud of quills into the crowd.

One of the darts caught Ulrich in the temple, leaving a long scratch that oozed dark ichor. He drew his pistol with impressive speed and sent a bolt of energy into the thing that had dared to wound him.

Two more of the boulder-spiders dropped into the mass of Lysites, sending bodies flying in all directions. With terrible grunts, they disgorged their young, who began to bite and gnaw on everything around them. Down the beach, a varied collection of creatures were being cast ashore. A ball of gelatinous material rolled a short distance, and then collapsed into a pile of seaweed and fleshy slugs with ridged fins. They began crawling with alarming speed towards the searchlight and everyone who was gathered around it.

A memory flashed through Margene's mind of a time years ago when a moth had somehow found its way into the scriptorium. Again and again, it flew into her candelabra, until it had finally caught fire and died. It had been heedless of pain or any wounds it suffered, because it had been driven mad; mad by the bright light of her candles.

'Inquisitor, I think your beacon is working a little too well,' she said.

Chavis pointed to the two Taurox. 'Cato, Erdon, get in the turrets and prepare to give us fire support.'

As the two men ran for the transports, the pack of quilled beasts turned their attention to the Scions' firing line. Their faces were covered with the blood and gore of the Lysites they had just finished feasting on. The monsters shook violently as they ran forward. Byrdgon's right arm became covered in quills. He fired his weapon and one of the creatures exploded into flaming chunks. The other Scions followed suit, lighting up the stony beach with las-fire.

'Keep them back,' Chavis yelled. 'Don't let them get close enough to fire those barbs at you.' He glanced at his monitor. The countdown timer was almost at zero. 'Inquisitor, we're nearing peak tide. Which of these is the specimen?'

Ulrich waved his auspex back and forth. 'I'm not... it's not any of these,' he shouted.

Byrdgon stumbled backwards, and fell face first to the ground. On either side of him, the Scions continued pouring las-fire into the quill creatures, but it seemed that every one they killed was replaced by two more.

Chavis dashed to Byrdgon and rolled him over. His right arm was swelling visibly. Black gel was seeping out from the base of every quill. He tried to say something, but could only produce choking sounds.

The tide came upon them with a deafening crash. Water flooded around the base of the searchlight and the treads of the nearest Taurox. The pack of quill creatures seemed to be invigorated by it, and surged ahead. They leapt upon the Scions and unleashed a flurry of biting, scratching attacks.

Chavis pulled a serrated combat knife from his belt and filled the hole in the line. To his left and right, the Scions were beating at the monsters with their rifles until they went down, and then stamping their heads flat to ensure they stayed that way. There were a lot of them, he admitted, but their main threat seemed to be their poisonous quills, which were rendered useless in close quarters. He was quite confident that, so long as they weren't allowed to get *too* close, he and his men would quickly

emerge as the victors in this fight.

Then, by the searchlight's glare, Chavis saw that larger creatures were emerging from the surf. They were slightly taller than a man, and dragged themselves forward on a pair of fat, chitin-plated claws. Their bodies were vaguely serpentine. Small bolts of electricity crackled around them.

They charged in an odd, scrabbling motion, bowling through the remaining quill creatures and impacting against the Scions. Chavis felt his whole body shiver uncontrollably as the things discharged a massive electrical shock. His muscles refused to obey him for a moment, and he dropped his knife. The next thing he knew he was on his back, claws trying to tear away his armour. There was a sharp and terrible pain in his thigh.

With great effort, Chavis dug his fingers into the thing's side, grabbed a fistful of blubber, and pulled. A gristly hole opened up, dumping reeking fluids all over him. The creature gave a high squeal and collapsed.

Chavis shoved its dead weight off him and scrambled back to his feet, ignoring the pain in his upper leg where he'd been wounded. His monitor started flashing a variety of telltales; yellow for Scions who were injured but recoverable, red for those who were beyond saving. He also noted that Margene had thrown herself into the fray. She had attached an oversized bayonet to the end of her boltgun, and was using it to chop through the bodies of the attacking creatures.

Ulrich fired his pistol into yet another group of aquatic horrors that were shambling and slithering their way towards the searchlight. It seemed as if every living thing in the worldwave were coming ashore with the intent to feast on them.

'Fire support on the water line!' Chavis yelled into his vox.

Atop both of the Taurox were cannons designed to blow apart light vehicles and heavily armoured infantry. Erdon and Cato began to shell the beach with them. With each explosion, a cone of gravel and water rocketed upwards. Chunks of shell and fatty tissue rained down.

Another of the clawed creatures leapt towards Chavis. He drew his pistol and shot the thing dead before it could shock him. The ocean was all around them now, completely covering the fallen and drenching those still standing almost to their waists. Sparks shot from the searchlight, and in an instant, it went out. The ruddy light of Ixoi came flooding back.

Ulrich's sword glinted in the moonlight as he slashed and thrust. His coat was torn at the shoulder and one side of his face was distorted. The bodies of dead things floated all around him.

Margene was the first to see it. She had just finished chopping one of the quill creatures in half, and was standing back to back with one of the Scions. His helmet was gone and one of his hands had been badly mangled. A shadow fell across them, and she looked up to see where it had come from.

Out of the worldwave rose a tree. At least, that was her initial impression: a tree whose vast trunk was sheathed in bark the colour of dried scabs. Its hundreds of cream-coloured branches curled and twitched as they stretched across the face of the moon. Some of them were tipped with claws as large as the Taurox.

Her body shook involuntarily as the truth dawned on her. It wasn't a tree. It was an enormous tentacle. In fact, it was a tentacle that was sprouting a myriad of other tentacles.

One by one, Chavis, Ulrich and the remaining Scions caught a glimpse of it, and despite their varied backgrounds, all of them were struck dumb. The Scions paused for only a fraction of a second before regaining their focus and continuing to fight off their attackers.

Ulrich however, despite his training and experience, found himself standing slack-jawed and

speechless. *This is Shelse*, he thought dimly. *No, worse: this is only a portion of Shelse*. His preconceptions crumbled within him, and were supplanted by sheer terror. Gone was any notion he might have once held that the creature would be captured in its entirety. All he cared about for the moment was surviving.

A rushing sound filled the air, and the full extent of the tidal swell came upon them. A wave, larger than any that had come before it, was curling up from the body of Lysios's ocean. The water looked purple in Ixoi's red glare. White caps glinted along its edge.

'Emperor, save us,' Margene whispered.

The wave reached its peak, and began to crumble. It struck the boulders along the shoreline with hurricane force, submerging them easily. A wall of water rolled towards them, and from its foaming crest came a monster. It was a thing dragged up from the deepest depths, with rubbery, ghostly-white skin. Its head was shaped like that of some gigantic fish. Its mouth was filled with teeth the size of swords. Its eyes glowed bright yellow, and a ridge of spines ran down the length of its back. Where it ended, no one could tell; the thing's body trailed back into the churning ocean.

'All Scions,' Chavis yelled into his vox, 'elimination protocol!'

Erdon and Cato continued to rain shells upon the shoreline. The giant thing bellowed as it was struck. One of its eyes exploded, showering the landscape in jelly. Wriggling the spines on its back, it swam forwards with the force of a runaway train. It swallowed two Scions whole, and knocked the searchlight into the water before it finally rammed its bulbous head into the side of Cato's Taurox. The side door caved in completely. The vehicle rocked, but did not tip over.

Margene, Ulrich, and Chavis began shooting at it, but none of the weapons they carried seemed to have any effect. Erdon hit it with another shell from his battle cannon. A hole opened halfway down the length of its body, and greasy blood gushed out.

In response, the monster raised itself up like a cobra preparing to strike, and then slammed its entire weight down onto the roof of Chavis's transport. The driver's section crumpled and the front tracks sagged in on themselves. Over the vox, the Scions could hear Cato screaming in agony.

The monster raised itself up again. It clamped the entire front half of the transport in its mouth, and shook it wildly. Metal plating and bits of machinery flew in all directions. Then the monster, satisfied with its catch, began to retract itself back into the ocean, taking the flattened Taurox with it.

'Kill it! Kill it!' Chavis was screaming.

In response, Erdon fired three more shells at the monster as it retreated. Two of them found their mark, and opened yet more gaping wounds in its hide. With a splash, it vanished back into the ocean.

Scion Cato's incoherent cries became the terrible sounds of a man drowning. Thankfully for all who could hear, his struggles were short lived.

Margene and Chavis kicked aside a myriad of dead creatures. Four Scions got to their feet. The rest were either dead or gone, the bodies washed out to sea.

Now that the beacon was destroyed, the number of creatures tumbling out of the ocean became greatly reduced. Waves continued to crest over the boulders, but these too were shrinking in magnitude. Still, it was not yet over.

The remaining quill beasts launched another volley of poisoned barbs, which bounced harmlessly off the Scions' armour. Chavis shot three of them. His last four men joined him at his side, and began firing their lasguns into the pack.

Margene quickly inserted a fresh clip into her bolter, and fired. Two more of the clawed things

blew apart into rubbery pieces. When a half-dead quill beast attempted to bite her leg, she stamped it to death beneath her heel.

Erdon's cannon shells had transformed the water line into a pockmarked moonscape. The craters filled with seawater and mangled pieces of meat. At last, he ceased firing, for there was nothing left on the beach to shoot at.

Chavis watched his men torch the last of the quill creatures with las-fire. He holstered his bolt pistol and spoke into his vox. 'Erdon, the area is clear. Grab a medi-kit and get out here.'

Ulrich was standing farther down the shore, where the water was still knee-high. He was staring out past the boulders. No more creatures were coming ashore. The cut on his face burned with a mixture of poison and salt. By his quick estimation, ten or eleven men had been killed, leaving him with only half a dozen Scions and the dialogus. They were down to one transport, and his equipment was all damaged, or utterly destroyed. But worse than all this, Shelse was nowhere to be seen. The worldwave was moving on, passing the plateau in its unstoppable circumnavigation of Lysios.

Ulrich began to shake. His knuckles turned white as he gripped his sword. He let loose a scream that echoed off the rocks. 'Ten years!'

The tempestor trudged up behind the inquisitor. A wave broke over the rocks.

'The worldwave won't pass this plateau again for ten years. All my planning... this whole trip... It's all been a waste!' He stumbled a few steps towards the ocean.

'A waste,' Chavis repeated.

Ulrich spun around. 'This is not my fault!'

'I never implied that it was, sir,' Chavis said, 'but what are your orders now?'

Ulrich's face twisted as he furiously tried to think of some means to salvage this operation. Nothing came. He sighed. 'Return to the space port, and go home.'

He gave the worldwave one final, longing look, and then started walking back up the beach.

Chavis left to see to his men without saying another word.

They heard Margene yelling. 'Inquisitor! Tempestor! Over here!'

The two men broke into a run, passing Erdon as he opened a medi-kit and began tending to the surviving Scions. They found Margene near the place where the Lysites had tried to confront them. One of the Taurox cannon shells had fallen here, littering the area with human body parts and dead sea creatures. In the middle of the scene was a wide, but shallow crater. At the bottom, submerged in salt water and pinned beneath the half-corpse of one of the boulder-spiders, lay the woman with the blue robe.

'I heard someone calling,' Margene said, 'and I found this.' She leapt down into the crater, and yanked back the woman's tattered robe.

Below her neck, the woman's skin was dark purple and covered in overlapping plates. A secondary set of arms sprouted from the middle of her ribcage.

Margene levelled her boltgun at the woman. 'You. Mutant. Confess your sins, and I will consider them. Who are you? What were you doing out here?'

The woman coughed up blood and said, 'It's Ixoi's Night...'

'When Lysios's moon is at perigee,' Margene clarified.

'Yes... We escort those who... offer themselves as tribute.'

'To the Brine Goddess?'

'Yes. To Shelse. She... she sends the Things That Live Within Her... to satisfy her hunger.' Her

head flopped back and her breathing became ragged. *‘I will devour them, and greatly.’*

‘Enough!’ Reciting from her own litany Margene said, *‘From the scourge of the Kraken, Our Emperor, deliver us. From the blasphemy of the Fallen, Our Emperor, deliver us.’*

Margene pulled the trigger and the woman’s entire upper half flew apart. She looked up, but Ulrich was gone. She climbed up from out of the crater, and found him kneeling nearby.

He pulled a pair of long gloves from his belt and began to don them hurriedly. ‘Get the containment chamber, Chavis,’ he yelled, ‘and bring it here. Now!’

Margene called to Ulrich, and received no response. She peered over his shoulder to see what was holding his attention so raptly. A segmented piece of tentacle was lying in a shallow depression in the ground. It was roughly the size of her arm. Ten or more smaller cilia sprouted from it like elongated fingers tipped with black talons, and there were bits of red shell near the bottom of it. It rolled and twisted, madly trying to escape from the hole.

‘Is that–’ Margene began.

She was interrupted by Chavis and Erdon rushing past her, carrying the heavy cylinder. They set it down next to Ulrich. Chavis opened the door and waited.

Ulrich finished putting on his gloves. He set his jaw, and then wrapped both hands around the tentacle piece. It immediately began thrashing about. The inquisitor had to fight to maintain his grip on it. With a grunt, he threw it into the cylinder. Chavis slammed the door shut.

The tentacle hammered at the inside of the container.

Ulrich was slightly short of breath as he said, ‘Get it aboard the transport immediately.’

Chavis and Erdon lifted the containment chamber up, and started back to the remaining Taurox. Ulrich peeled off his gloves and put them back into his coat. He looked at her, his face beaming, and followed after the two Scions.

‘Inquisitor,’ Margene said as she came alongside him. ‘There is obviously more transpiring on Lysios than meets the eye. We should send a message to the Canoness.’

‘No, I think not.’

Margene pointed back to the crater. ‘There is heresy here.’

‘There is heresy everywhere, but I will not have that woman rampaging all around and getting in my way. No, I’m afraid that the Canoness’s righteous fury will have to wait until my work here is complete.’

‘Inquisitor, I have a duty to report religious sedition. I promise you, I will make no mention of that... *thing* in the storage container.’

‘Communications blackout,’ Ulrich spat. ‘That means you don’t talk to anyone, about anything, unless I say so.’

‘I understand, inquisitor, but surely–’

‘This conversation is over. For your sake, we should never have to repeat it.’

He climbed up into the Taurox.

Margene stood alone for a moment, trying to dampen her fury. Somehow, she knew, she had to contact the Canoness. Something on this world was coming to a head, and it had to be stopped before it was too late.

She climbed aboard, slamming the hatch shut behind her. The Taurox’s engine roared to life, and the transport sped away.

The beach was deserted. Only the dead were present to witness the titanic shape that once again

broke through the surface of the worldwave. It clawed at the moon, pining for its unreachable love and calling curses down on all of those who opposed it.

‘What will our lives be like, my love, when we are at last united? Will you descend forever and join me, or will you scoop me up in your arms, and carry me back to your abode in the sky? Promise me, O, promise me, we’ll be together soon. The stars begin to fall, and this era draws to a close...’

– Cantos Continuous, M41

CHAPTER SIX

The moon was beginning to set. It was as dark as night-time got on Lysios. To one side, the mountain was a wall of soaking wet rock. On the other was the receding swell of the worldwave. Erdon watched the road carefully as he drove. It was far rougher than it had been when they had used it to ascend the mountain earlier. The passing tide had heaved up rocks and covered it with a thick carpet of weeds and mud. On at least three occasions, warning indicators flashed on the dashboard display telling him that the Taurox was losing traction. That alone spoke to the treacherousness of their route.

Chavis sat in the command seat next to him, also keeping a watchful eye on the road conditions. Both men saw the problem at the same time. Erdon brought the Taurox to a stop.

‘Stay here,’ Chavis said. ‘I’ll take a closer look.’ He got out of his seat, grabbed his helmet from a compartment on the bulkhead, and made his way to a side hatch. In the rear of the Taurox, Margene sat with her head down. Ulrich was sitting on the floor next to the containment cylinder. The tiny observation window was fogged over, and drops of condensation ran down the sides. The tentacle creature had stopped its mad convulsing within the first hour of the trip.

Besides Erdon, he had four other Scions remaining. Five if he included Byrdgon, who was lying in a near comatose state across three seats. His arm was clearly infected beyond the capability of any field medicine. Dark lines had begun to spread across his neck and chest. The others, Brandt, Thieus, Savdra, and Devries, had been patched up with supplies from the Scion’s ‘Martyr’s Gift’ medi-kit, including protein healing salves, suture tape, and in Thieus’s case, a temporary bionic hand.

As he opened the hatch, Margene’s head snapped up. ‘What’s wrong?’ she asked.

‘The road ahead of us looks very bad. I’m going out to see if it’s passable.’

She was on her feet at once. ‘I’ll come with you.’

Chavis jumped down. His wounded leg gave a distant cry of pain that he stoically ignored. The air was cool and wet. Thick mud and weeds made sucking sounds beneath his feet as he walked around to the front of the Taurox. The night became as bright as day thanks to the amplifying lenses in his helmet and his suspicions were confirmed.

They had come to the place where, earlier, the mountainside had crumbled and nearly swept Erdon’s Taurox over the edge and into the sea below. The road was now completely gone. Walls of

rock and mud had come sliding down from somewhere above, and the trench they had fought to traverse was now a yawning abyss.

‘Erdon?’ he said into his vox.

‘Here, tempestor.’

‘This is no good. Not even a Taurox could get across a chasm this wide. We’ll have to find another way back to the hab-crawler.’

‘The secondary route to the west?’

‘My thoughts exactly.’

Chavis turned around to go back to the Taurox, only to find Margene blocking his way.

‘Tempestor, I need to ask you something.’

‘Yes?’

Margene considered him for a moment. ‘*He who allows the alien to live shares in the crime of its existence,*’ she said at last. ‘Would you agree with that statement?’

Chavis’s answer was immediate. ‘Yes.’

‘Of course you do. Any sane person would. But if that is so, then why is the inquisitor bringing that thing back? Why are we letting him?’

‘We aren’t letting him do anything. He does not answer to us.’

‘Doesn’t it bother you to have that thing on board?’ Margene jerked a thumb towards the rear compartment.

Chavis considered the question for a moment. ‘It’s irrelevant. My mission is to ensure the inquisitor’s safety, and return him to that landing ship.’ With that, he walked past her and back into the transport.

‘What if I told you that it’s still alive? Would that change your opinion?’

Chavis stopped.

‘I managed to steal a glance over the inquisitor’s shoulder a while ago, and I’m almost certain that I could see it moving around inside that cylinder.’

‘Almost certain?’

‘Well... it was hard to tell, but—’

‘Do you believe the creature represents an immediate danger to either yourself or any member of the team?’

‘No,’ she said hesitantly. ‘I don’t... I don’t know.’

‘Then we cannot take any action that would contradict our orders.’

Margene scowled. ‘When it tries to kill me, though, you will make certain to avenge me?’

‘Of course,’ Chavis replied. He climbed back into the Taurox.

‘Sir,’ he called to Ulrich, ‘I need to inform you that the route we used to get to the plateau has become totally impassable. However, there is another way back that should see us arrive by late afternoon.’

Ulrich shook his head, but did not turn his attention away from the containment chamber. ‘It’s simply one delay after another.’

‘I could use that map of yours.’

‘Fine. Just get me back to the lander and off this planet.’ He pulled the waterproofed paper from his belt and tossed it over his shoulder. Chavis caught it in one hand.

‘As quickly as possible, sir.’ Chavis returned to the seat beside Erdon.

Margene climbed up and slammed the hatch shut. Wordlessly, she dropped into the nearest seat and stared into space. It took some time to get the transport turned around. By the time they were under way, the suns were beginning to crest the horizon, and the dialogus had fallen into an exhausted sleep.

The moth was fluttering against the candelabrum. She looked up from her desk where she had been steadfastly copying *Onward, Emperor's Daughters*, one of her favourite hymns, to see the little insect's wings catch fire.

'Why did you do that?' she asked it. 'You should know better. Now you're going to die.'

She dipped her quill in the inkpot, and returned to her calligraphy. Somewhere in the convent above her, she could hear the choir singing each stanza as she wrote it out, which was odd, because the walls in the scriptorium were so thick that normally she couldn't hear anything at all.

The moth continued to beat its wings furiously against the candles, even though it was now nothing but a burnt little husk. She did her best to ignore it, and dipped her quill again. However, now her lovely feather had become one of the sharp, poisoned spines that she had helped pull out of Scion Byrdgon. The inkwell was filled with water. It began to bubble up, spilling all over her parchment. The beautiful lines smeared and ran down the page.

The dead moth finally succeeded in blowing out the candles. She stood up to find a taper and relight them. The floor was covered in water. Stumbling about in the dark, she was unable to find either light or the door. The water continued to rise.

Something wrapped itself around her legs. There was an explosion of pain. She could not see it, but somehow she knew that beneath the rising water, cream-coloured tentacles were burrowing into her flesh. As she floated up to the rafters, more and more tentacles reached up from the depths to devour her. She struggled against them, but they were immensely strong. The water covered her face, and she discovered that it was salty. Above her the choir was still singing, but the lyrics had changed.

'*Promise me, O, promise me, we'll be together soon...*' they sang.

Her lungs burned as she tried to prolong her final breath. The tentacles had now produced razor-sharp claws, and were beginning to slice her legs open. Tiny, unseen mouths were taking bites out of her abdomen and neck. At last, she could stand the agony no more. Her dying scream came out as a stream of muffled bubbles, and then the room shook violently.

Margene startled awake and stared about her. Thieus, the Scion with the replacement hand, was sitting across from her. 'What happened?' she gasped.

'We just drove over something large, that's all.'

She ran a hand through her hair, and looked down the length of the compartment. No one appeared to have moved very much. Ulrich was still seated by his precious specimen, although his head wobbled as if he were on the edge of sleep. Scion Byrdgon's breath came in ragged gasps. His body had begun to emit a rank odour.

There was a sudden *boom*. The Taurox shook as if some giant, petulant hand had picked it up and then thrown it back down. Margene tumbled to the floor. She heard the containment cylinder topple over and strike something. Everything skewed to the left, and she realised that they were spinning. When the Taurox finally came to rest, the air was filled with pungent smoke. Margene held her hands to her nose. Blood was pouring out from between her fingers.

Ulrich was clambering to his feet, cursing loudly. He worked desperately to set the specimen

container upright again.

‘Another rock?’ Margene asked.

Thieus shook his head.

Chavis wheeled around in his chair. ‘It sounded like a mine. Scions, gear up and disembark.’

Moments later, Chavis, Erdon, and the others stood outside beneath the blistering twin suns. Erdon had donned a pair of insulated gloves that came up to his shoulders and brought out a large metal case filled with tools. The others had their lasguns at the ready.

The Taurox had come to rest along the perimeter of a circular plaza. A dark blast pattern radiated from the rear left tread assembly. Otherwise, the ground was covered with a dense bed of dried seaweed and fish bones. Patches of lichen bloomed in every nook and cranny. Everything was stained with the powdery white residue of dried salt. The streets were choked with weeds and tumbled blocks of masonry.

They had come down from Mount Loraz and wound their way through a series of wide canyons. The rock walls had been etched with chalky white horizontal stripes, evidence of past water levels. Chavis had been cautious at first. The walls of rock made for short sight-lines, and danger could be around any turn. By mid-morning, however, they had yet to encounter a single soul, and his alertness level decreased. This part of Lysios was apparently uninhabited.

Perhaps abandoned was a better word. They had begun to encounter ancient buildings: a few at first, but then growing in number and density. Chavis checked the inquisitor’s map. They were passing along the edge of a small city. Whatever name it might have once gone by had been drowned and lost three thousand years ago. Its once mighty rockcrete towers and walls were now just a series of crumbling foundations and rubble piles, worn smooth by so many passing floods.

Erdon squatted down next to the Taurox. With one hand, he groped behind the damaged section. ‘Pressure-sensitive mine, all right.’

‘Home built?’ Chavis asked.

Erdon shook his head. ‘No. This was military.’

‘Who would plant explosives out in the middle of nowhere like this?’ Devries asked.

‘An excellent question,’ Chavis said.

‘One we don’t have time to answer,’ Ulrich said. He was standing at the top of the rear boarding ramp. ‘Let’s move on.’

Erdon withdrew his hand. His glove was stained with some dark liquid. He sniffed it, and then held it aloft. ‘Tempestor, that’s fuel.’

Chavis lowered his head and exhaled slowly. ‘Repairable?’

Erdon stood up. ‘Patchable, yes, sir. Enough to get us back to the hab-crawler. But if we’ve lost too much fuel...’

‘I know. Get to it.’

Ulrich threw his hands in the air, and returned to the inside of the transport. Erdon crawled beneath the Taurox while the others kept watch. He worked for nearly half an hour before finally emerging.

‘I’ve managed to patch it, sir,’ he told Chavis, ‘but there’s a fair amount of shrapnel damage underneath.’

‘Do we have enough fuel to make it back?’

Erdon shook his head.

‘We’ll need to consult the inquisitor, then.’

‘Consult him about what, exactly?’ Ulrich called. He had been sitting just inside the rear ramp.

‘About our next move, sir. I would recommend, since our transport no longer has enough fuel to make it back to the lander, that we contact the Battle Sisters and request an evacuation.’

Ulrich stood up and marched down the ramp. ‘Absolutely not.’

‘Sir, the alternatives are—’

‘Tempestor!’ Brandt cried. He had perched himself on top of a high mound of moss-covered bricks. He waved a hand in the air, signalling that something was approaching their position.

‘Scions,’ Chavis barked.

Devries, Savdra, and Thieus hoisted their guns to their shoulders. Erdon quickly dropped his insulated gloves and grabbed his volley gun.

The sound of engines drifted on the wind. With squealing tyres, a trio of groundcars came tearing around the corner of a ruined building. Each one had six wheels and no roof. They were packed with men in uniforms the colour of faded sandstone, with dark blue piping along the seams of their trousers. Their boots and armour were scuffed and weathered. The majority of their weapons appeared to be large-calibre projectile rifles, but Chavis counted at least three serviceable-looking grenade launchers. None of them wore any kind of hat or helmet. Their hands and faces were sunburnt and blistered, and each of them looked as if it had been months since their last good meal.

‘Autonomous fire sanctioned!’ Chavis yelled.

The groundcars spun wildly, and the men aboard them opened fire. Bullets ricocheted off piles of rock and the armour of the Scions. Two of the uniformed men hoisted a portable rocket launcher between them. The missile they let loose slammed into the side of the Taurox in a thundering ball of fire.

Chavis and the Scions returned fire with everything they had. The four soldiers in the lead groundcar were all struck in the centre of their torsos. The heat of the las-bolts melted their body armour and set their clothing on fire. Erdon had finished readying the volley gun. He struck their car with a howling salvo of las-fire that tore clean through the armour plating around the engine. The vehicle went up in a pillar of smoke and flame.

The soldiers in the other two vehicles sprayed the Scions with bullets. Savdra and Brandt killed two of them for their efforts. Devries jerked and fell onto his back. He clutched at his left arm where a bullet had pierced him through a gap in his armour.

‘I’m all right,’ he shouted.

The groundcars wheeled around, and began to flee down another street. Erdon fired the volley gun again. Steam began to rise from its heavy casing. Most of the shots struck the street and walls, leaving pools of glass in their wake. One of the groundcars, however, took a direct hit to its rear and exploded. The bodies of its occupants flew up into the air and crashed on the weed-covered pavement.

The third groundcar roared away.

Chavis cut the air with a flattened hand. ‘Hold your fire. Move up and hold your fire.’

The Scions sprinted to where the first wreck sat smouldering, and took up a position against a crumbling wall. Chavis grabbed a dead man’s boot and pulled him inside a doorway. The tempestor rolled the man’s face from side to side, and considered his apparel.

‘Professional-grade cloth,’ he said. ‘And this flak armour isn’t something that the average Lysite has

access to.'

'His weapon's in decent shape too.' Erdon pointed to a large patch on the corpse's left shoulder. It depicted several bright white stars against a field of dark blue. The number '99' was emblazoned across it in faded yellow. 'What about this?'

'A unit insignia of some kind. I don't recognise it.'

A shadow fell across them and a voice said, 'That's because it hasn't been used for quite some time.'

Erdon and Chavis looked up to Ulrich standing in the doorway. Margene was behind him.

'Only ninety-nine worlds received such emblems for their soldiers, and believe it or not, at one time, Lysios was among them. This man was a member of the Lysios Home Guard.'

Behind him, Margene gave a slight gasp.

'Inquisitor,' Chavis said, getting to his feet, 'you should remain in the Taurox. This is still an active zone.'

Ulrich waved a hand dismissively. 'Those men were driving groundcars. That means they must have some kind of fuel, yes? Fuel we can take and use?'

Chavis nodded. 'Yes, sir. I had the same thought.'

'Inquisitor,' Margene said, 'There was only one unit of trained soldiers on Lysios, and they were all attached to the planetary governor. If these men are here, then the governor must be somewhere nearby. We have to find him.'

'You'd think so,' Ulrich said, 'but in point of fact, we don't.'

'Then let me contact Canoness Grace, and give her the coordinates for this place. The Sisters have been searching for the governor—'

Ulrich cut her off sharply. 'I told you before: we are under a communications blackout. We will speak to no one, because no one is to be informed of our mission here.'

Margene glared at the inquisitor. 'Why?'

Ulrich gave her no answer. 'Tempestor, let's go find where these men have gotten themselves to.'

'Very good, sir. Devries?'

'Yes, tempestor?'

'I want you to stay behind. Seal up the Taurox, and man the cannon. If any more of these men show up...'

'I understand.'

'The rest of you, prepare to move out. This is a search-and-destroy scenario, sigma delta.'

'Sigma delta?' Margene asked quietly. Her eyes remained fixed on the inquisitor.

Chavis removed the ammo clip on his bolt pistol and inspected the first round. 'Urban combat environment, multiple targets.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

Chavis led the way down the ruined street. The tyre tracks were simple enough to follow among the seaweed and algae drifts, and it took them only a few minutes to encounter another attack group. Chavis could hear them fussing with something that sounded large and heavy. He motioned for everyone to stop, and carefully peered around the corner.

Beyond was a small square, hedged in on all sides by tall ruins. Chavis saw a group of soldiers gathered around the cracked base of an ancient fountain.

‘Must be a checkpoint. I count two men with rifles, one with a grenade launcher, and what looks like a commanding officer,’ he whispered over his vox. ‘The last two have set up a crew-served heavy weapon. Looks like an Agrippina-pattern autocannon.’

‘Only six of them?’ Ulrich scoffed. ‘This should be easy.’

Chavis was no stranger to the perils of urban combat. Years of experience had taught him that, within the confines of a city, nothing was easy. And if it appeared to be so, it was usually a trap.

‘No,’ he said, ‘we should bypass this.’

‘What?’

‘A set-up like this is designed to draw us into any number of hazards. That square could be mined. Could be targeted by snipers. There could be sentry guns hidden on the perimeter. Trust me, sir, when I tell you that there’s something amiss here.’

Chavis expected an argument from the inquisitor, and was surprised when he got none. ‘All right then, we’ll go around.’

Chavis led the group across a shattered cross street and into a low building, gesturing everyone to keep down. Through the empty windows and the holes in the walls, they could catch glimpses of the square and the checkpoint.

The tempestor picked up the groundcar tracks again one block to the north. They turned sharply and vanished down an access tunnel below the street. The tunnel entrance was heavily guarded. Chavis counted three platoons of solders, and at least as many heavy lascannons. All told, there were nearly forty men blocking their path.

‘There’s no avoiding this one, I take it?’ Ulrich asked knowingly.

‘That depends, sir. Are you still adamant that you will not contact anyone to come and evacuate us?’

Ulrich stared at the tempestor.

‘Then, no, there’s no going around this.’ Chavis wished briefly that he had more men. But he did not. These four would have to suffice. He moved in between Savdra and Margene. ‘A direct charge will see us all killed,’ he said. ‘We have to hit them on a flank, so that they won’t be able to turn their total firepower on us. Erdon, when we get into range, your job is to slag those lascannons.

‘Savdra, I want you to stay here with Sister Margene. Your job is to provide distraction fire. Make a lot of noise. Keep them focused here. If they try to get too close to you, give them some grenades.

‘Thieus and Brandt, you’re with me. We cover Erdon until he gets the volley gun in range, then we close the distance and finish them off.’

Chavis looked at Ulrich and remembered which of them was actually in charge of the mission. ‘Is that acceptable, sir?’

‘With one exception. I’m coming with you.’

Minutes later, Chavis, Ulrich, and the others had made their way around to the side of the underground entrance. The sound of Margene’s boltgun could not be missed and the guards began to return fire, the lascannons blowing holes through the rockcrete around her and Savdra.

Ulrich and Chavis broke from their cover, followed by Brandt and Thieus. Erdon, in the rear with the volley gun, fired a quartet of searing las-beams into the nearest platoon. Three men were blown apart instantly. Brandt and Thieus, as they sprinted forwards, each managed to down two more before the element of surprise was exhausted. Three of the remaining five men wheeled around and fired their rifles. Most of the bullets impacted in the street or ricocheted off into the ruins. One mushroomed off Ulrich’s refractor field, millimetres in front of his neck. The two men manning the platoon’s lascannon desperately tried to turn it, but by the time they did so, Chavis was lobbing a grenade into their midst. It bounced far past its intended target, and detonated in a cloud of burning shrapnel.

Ulrich was the first to leap into the melee. His sword cleaved the air above the soldiers’ heads as they ducked to avoid his blows. Chavis closed to point-blank range and shot the closest man through the heart with his bolt pistol. Brandt, Thieus, and Erdon rushed up behind their tempestor and began savagely beating whoever got in their way.

Margene and Savdra kept up their fire from across the street, but the second platoon of men were no longer fooled. They came charging forward to help their comrades.

Ulrich swept his blade downward, and cut clean through the two men who had avoided him seconds before. Chavis put another bolt through the armour of a soldier, while beside him, Thieus smashed the butt of his lasgun into an opponent’s face.

The group that had rushed to reinforce their fellows punched and kicked at Chavis’s tiny assault group for all they were worth. The inquisitor absorbed the majority of their blows, letting them bounce harmlessly off either his refractor field or his ornate armour.

The third lascannon missed striking Margene by only the slimmest of margins. She ducked back down behind the wall she and Savdra were using for cover as the beam punched clean through. Savdra was hit twice in the chest by bullets, but his armour held firm.

Margene and Savdra thinned the remaining platoon while Ulrich continued his murderous spree. Two more soldiers died on his blade. Then three more. Before long, the dead and severely wounded

were piling up around him. When the last of the governor's guards attempted to fall back into the tunnel, Ulrich led the charge that cut them down.

Silence swept back into the ruined city. Margene and Savdra emerged from the shattered building covered with a multitude of small cuts and the dust of vaporised rockcrete. Brandt had lost his helmet and was bleeding from a deep gash on his chin. Chavis's leg wound had opened up again. He tore a blue sash from one of the dead soldiers, and tied it tightly over his thigh.

The inquisitor seemed completely unharmed. More than that, Chavis thought, he seemed invigorated. He looked down into the tunnel entrance. 'We should keep moving. Who knows what might be waiting for us?'

Chavis took the lead once again. The group moved underground, past a long-abandoned rail platform. They were forced to stop at four separate junctions where additional tunnels stretched off into the gloom. At each one, Chavis scoured the floor for signs of the groundcar. Eventually, they emerged into a titanic space filled with trains.

At some point in the distant past, this place had been a depot of some kind. Now, it was a museum to decay. High overhead was an arched glass roof, covered in centuries of sediment. The light that filtered through was dim and buttery yellow. The locomotives and rail cars were massive, ornate affairs that had once impressed all who witnessed them. Now they were rusted and encased in salty residue. Everything stank of brine and rot. No fires burned in the trains' reactors, and no lights shone in their carriages.

No, Chavis saw. That wasn't entirely true. He could make out lights near the centre of the space. There was still life to be found here, below the dead cities of Lysios.

In the middle of the train yard was a squat, round building three storeys tall. Guards were posted on either side of the single entryway.

Ulrich surveyed the structure. 'Is this where they're holed up?' he asked. Then, without waiting for an answer, he walked towards the doorway. 'Well, come on then.'

Ulrich shot the two guards before they had time to react. As the Scions pressed in behind him, he kicked the door open. The ground floor of the building was set up as a single large room. Along one wall were a series of empty ticket kiosks. Tables and couches were scattered about. A pair of large signboards that had once hung from the ceiling now lay broken on the floor. In the centre of the room was a wide spiral staircase. Thudding down it came twenty more soldiers.

Margene, Chavis, and the Scions burst through the door and fanned out to either side of the inquisitor. He charged forward, firing his pistol as he went. The soldiers on the staircase welcomed him with bullets. Ulrich's entourage returned the overture with las-fire and bolts. Heat poured off Erdon's volley gun as it fired.

Ulrich reached the bottom of the stairs and slashed the throats of two men. Then the rest were leaping down at him, hoping to knock him back under the press of their bodies. He twisted and turned. His sword tore through protective plates. Bodies began to fall off the sides of the staircase.

Chavis called his men into close assault, and the five of them pressed in beside Ulrich. Ulrich began to bleed from a cut above his eye, but the initiative remained with the inquisitor. The soldiers tried to retreat back to the second floor. Ulrich and Chavis swept their legs out from under them, and killed them.

Ulrich sheathed his sword. 'We need to search this entire building,' he said. 'Margene and I will start down here, the rest of you secure the upper floors.'

Chavis saluted with his fist over his heart, and led his men to the upstairs. They had only been gone a minute or two when Thieus came charging back down. He pointed at Margene. ‘You need to see this.’

Margene glanced toward Ulrich, but the inquisitor was occupied within one of the abandoned kiosks.

She followed him to the third floor. The ceiling was a filthy dome of stained glass. The rest of the room was dominated by a carved metal desk large enough to accommodate half a dozen men. Seated behind it in a high-backed chair was what she at first glance took to be a mummified corpse. There was a single hole, the size of a bolt, in the centre of its chest. It was a man, or had been at some point. His skin was like vellum. There were strange machines all around him, connected to him by transparent tubes, coloured cables, and suction pads.

Everywhere, there was paper. Reams and reams, piled in stacks and rolled up into scrolls. Boxes upon boxes were filled to overflowing with sheaves. It was more than Margene had seen in her entire life.

All the Scions, save Chavis, had their weapons levelled at the man behind the desk. The tempestor gestured to the machinery and paper mountains. ‘What is all this?’

Margene plucked a handful of sheets from the box nearest her. Each page was densely packed with words written in a tiny, perfect script.

‘This was done by machine,’ she said. ‘I would say that all of this has been dictated into a transcriber.’

‘But what is it?’

Margene flipped through the pages she had in her hand. Along the top of each one were the same two words in bold print: ‘*Cantos Continuous.*’

‘What?’

‘It’s High Gothic. It means “everlasting song”. It seems to be the title for all of this.’ She read on a bit more. It quickly became obvious to her that these writings were supposed to have come from the Brine Goddess. It could hardly be called poetry. It was more like a series of incoherent ramblings. ‘This is Shelsist literature. All of it. Emperor save us.’ She dropped the pages to the floor, and crossed to the desk. She noted that the tall chair had obscured two additional rooms. One contained a large bed covered in mouldy sheets. The other held two smaller chairs and what appeared to be some kind of very old communications array.

She picked up another sheaf and riffled through them. ‘These seem to be more recent,’ she said, ‘but they’re just as nonsensical.’

Chavis seemed satisfied. ‘As long as there’s no danger here, we need to see about finding a drum or two of fuel.’

Margene nodded absently. ‘I’ll be fine. I just want to sort through some of this before we go.’

Chavis, Erdon, and Thieus left. Margene barely noticed.

Her eyes were fixed on the parchment sheet in her hand. Printed near the top, just below the title bar, was yet another paragraph wherein Shelse called out to Ixoi. What frightened Margene, however, was that she had heard it before.

‘*Promise me, O, promise me,*’ she read, ‘*we’ll be together soon. The stars begin to fall, and this era draws to a close...*’

It wasn’t possible. There was no way that she could have dreamed these exact words. Yet here they

were. The Shelsist leaders had received them and transcribed them, and she too had received them somehow. She thought about the Brine Prophet that the Canoness had encountered months before. Canoness Grace had said the man was possessed, that he was channelling an evil presence, and speaking as if on behalf of the Brine Goddess.

Was that what had been happening here, she wondered? Had the former Governor allowed Shelse to speak through him? Had he set down every awful word, and then passed it on to the cult at large? Very likely. But it still didn't explain how the words had come into her mind.

She looked into the comms room again.

Chavis, Erdon, and Thieus found a garage one level below the ground floor. Only one of the Governor's converted groundcars was there, although Thieus was the one who pointed out that there was room enough for twenty more such vehicles. In one corner, beneath a sheet of waterproof canvas, they found three crates filled with spearguns, and two empty cases for explosives. They also found a cache of fuel drums. They hefted one of the barrels into the back of the car, and Erdon started the engine and drove it up into the darkened railway tunnels. Brandt and Savdra met them outside the main depot building.

'Where's Ulrich?' Chavis asked them.

'He went to get the dialogus,' Savdra replied. 'Told us to come out here and cover you.'

There was an explosion from inside the main depot building and a shattering of glass. The five men raced inside. The ground floor was empty, but the smell of smoke and burnt flesh wafted down to them from above.

They emerged at the top of the stairs to find the room on fire. Part of the stained-glass ceiling had been smashed in. The gigantic desk was turned over on its side, and everywhere the *Cantos Continuous* burned. The bodies of five more Lysios Home Guard lay in heaps among the blaze. Chavis found the inquisitor on the floor near the bed. He seemed dazed.

'Inquisitor,' he shouted, 'are you wounded?'

'I'm all right.' Ulrich refused help as he returned to standing. 'They came in through there. Took us by surprise.'

'Where's the dialogus?'

Thieus ran into one of the adjacent rooms, and emerged dragging Margene beneath the arms. Her skin was blackened and cracked, and jagged pieces of shrapnel jutted out of her arms and legs. She left a trail of blood as Thieus dragged her.

She wheezed loudly, turned her blind, lidless eyes towards Ulrich, and died.

Thieus lowered his head.

Ulrich kicked something heavy across the floor.

Chavis saw that it was a man-portable grenade launcher, and a likely picture of events formed in his mind. Another unit of the governor's guards had come in through the roof. They had surprised the inquisitor and Sister Margene. In the ensuing fight, someone had used explosives in a confined space. The end result couldn't be anything less than death. It was all very neat.

He reminded himself once again that there was almost always something misleading about things which appeared to be simple.

'Her body,' Ulrich said. 'Perhaps we should take it with us, and return it to her sisters.'

Chavis blinked. This mission had so far cost the lives of eleven Tempestus Scions, and not once

had Ulrich suggested that their corpses be recovered.

‘Why would we do that, sir? Sentiment is a waste of time and resources. We need to focus all our resources on getting you back to the hab-crawler.’

Ulrich said nothing further. He simply walked past the burning stacks of the *Cantos* and down the stairs to the waiting groundcar.

Before they arrived back at the Taurox, Chavis’s monitor informed him that Byrdgon had died. While Erdon and Thieus filled the tank with the pilfered fuel, Chavis took a moment to peer into the containment cylinder. The tentacle segment was lying very still, the cilia flaccid. He did not know why, but he felt certain it, in its own way, was staring back at him.

‘Let’s be on our way, tempestor,’ Ulrich said. ‘Leave the xenology to the experts.’

‘Yes, sir.’

The hatches closed, the engine started, and the transport rumbled away from the nameless city. Above them, in the clear sky, a flaming object fell, trailing black smoke behind it. It was followed shortly by another.

Then another.

Then another.

‘The time has come, the sky descends! The Murderess and her agents must be destroyed, so that a new world may be born. Your Goddess commands it...’

– Cantos Continuous, M41

CHAPTER EIGHT

Erdon's right eye was black and swollen, his hands red and blistered from handling the volley gun. Chavis had smeared his upper leg with an auto-cauterising thermic gel, sealing his wound with a thick layer of scar tissue. It itched beneath its dressing. Neither man complained. In fact, neither man had said anything since leaving the ruined city.

Behind them, the other passengers were quiet as well. Ulrich had gone back to his place beside the containment chamber. Devries had the Martyr's Gift medi-kit open on the seat next to him as he dug the bullet out of his arm and covered the hole with suture tape. Savdra and Thieus sat across from one another, helmets off and heads down.

The silence was broken when the air outside was filled with a high-pitched screaming that grew in volume. Everyone in the Taurox heard it. The Scions snapped to a state of alertness, for it sounded exactly like a bomb falling from a great height.

The sound grew into a roar. Brandt, Thieus, Devries, and Savdra each looked out of one of the viewing slots above their heads. They saw no sign of any missile coming towards them, but they did see a fireball. The nucleus was a large, dark mass, wreathed in orange flames. It trailed sonic booms as it passed overhead, and the Taurox rocked from side to side. The fireball landed several kilometres to the south of them, sending up a titanic cone of dirt and shaking the ground.

'Just a meteor,' Devries said as he sat back down.

'That was actually fairly close,' Erdon said.

'It was,' Chavis agreed. 'I'm going up to the turret to take a look.' He opened the hatch above his head and raised his chair.

The wind that battered Chavis's face was hot and smelled of ash. The impact crater to the south sent a pillar of grey smoke into the air. Aside from that, however, the land stretched out dead and flat from horizon to horizon. Centuries of oceanic flooding had erased any hills or valleys that might have once been here, and left the land so salted that not even the hardiest of weeds could survive. The sky above was pale blue and cloudless, but stained by multiple smoky black lines.

Chavis tried to recall if Lysios was known for particularly violent or spectacular meteor storms. The dialogus would have known, he thought. If only she hadn't died.

Behind him, the Taurox sent up a tall plume of dust as it sped across the wasteland. It made them an easy potential target. While he considered ordering Erdon to slow down, he noticed that theirs was not the only dust cloud being generated. He retracted the seat back down inside the Taurox and sealed the hatch.

‘It’s possible that we’re being followed,’ he said.

Ulrich suddenly looked worried. ‘We’re being followed?’

‘Possibly, I said.’

‘By whom?’

‘I can’t tell. They’re quite some distance behind us.’

‘Threat level?’ Erdon asked.

Chavis shook his head. ‘Minimal, if any at all. They won’t catch up. Whatever it is they’re travelling in isn’t nearly fast enough.’

The meteors continued to streak across the sky, growing in frequency with every passing hour. Chavis checked behind them regularly and the other vehicles, whomever they belonged to, continued to follow along. Shortly after noon, the hab-crawler came into view. From the ground, it appeared as a gigantic block of machinery that rumbled along slowly on mammoth treads. The settlement proper rode on top like a collection of low buildings built on the back of a turtle. Access ramps trailed behind it. When they had left the crawler the previous day, these ramps had been clear. Now, they were packed with rickety carts and hundreds of people on foot. Men, women, and children were pushing and shoving one another, all trying to make their way up the ramps and onto the crawler.

‘Reduce speed, tempestor?’ Erdon asked.

‘We haven’t the time. Plough through. They’ll move. Or not.’

Ulrich had risen from his seat beside the cylinder and made his way to the front. He peered through the front window slits at the tumultuous crowd. ‘Use your smoke launchers,’ he said. ‘They’ll scatter.’

Erdon said nothing, but simply thumbed a series of switches on the control panel before him. From either side of the vehicle, there came a soft chuffing sound. Metal canisters bounced into the crowd and began spewing thick clouds of choking grey smoke. Gasping, the people drew back.

The Taurox ascended the ramp, and turned onto the winding street that led to the landing field. This too was filled with people. They poured out from the patchwork buildings and gathered on the low rooftops, pointing up to the sky where fiery black streaks now fell like rain.

The mob only worsened as they approached the field. All around them were people laden with bags and cases, or bundles of clothing and provisions wrapped hastily with plastek cords. They were shouting and crying. Many of them were pressed up against the metal fence that cordoned off the landing field from the rest of the hab-crawler. On the other side of the chain-link, the Battle Sisters had established two semi-circular barricades with three women behind each. An additional pair of women stood just inside the single entryway.

Erdon did not slow the Taurox at all until they came to the gate. Chavis spied a few weapons in the crowd: long, barbed poles, spearguns, and even a few of the kinetic bullet rifles the governor’s guard had used. He could also hear something of what the people were shouting. They were screaming at the Sisters to save them, or to do something, or to let them come in and board the shuttle. The two Sisters rolled the gate open, and shut it once more as the Taurox passed.

The Canoness emerged from the doorway of the control tower, flanked by two Battle Sisters armed

with storm bolters. The three of them walked with determined strides directly into the path of the Taurox. Erdon brought the vehicle to a screeching halt just as the front grille of the engine housing touched the Canoness's chest plate. She stared up into the front viewing slits with a look of indignant fury.

Ulrich felt a twinge of anxiety. 'Here are your orders, gentlemen,' Ulrich said, loud enough for all of the Scions to hear. 'I want the containment cylinder taken aboard the lander at once. Then, contact our ship in orbit and tell them that we will be returning within the hour. Do not let Canoness Grace or any of her Sororitas get in your way, or attempt to slow you down. This is our mission. Not theirs.'

He exited through the rear ramp, pausing for a moment to rest his hand on the cylinder. The tentacle within had long since stopped moving. It was regrettable, he thought. A living specimen would have been a much more impressive prize than a deceased sample.

When Ulrich stepped onto the landing field, the Canoness and her two charges came around the side of the Taurox and blocked his path. 'So,' she said sternly, 'I see you have returned.' Her eyes flashed down to the blackened metal plating behind the repaired quad tracks.

'Indeed, Canoness,' Ulrich said. His tone was cordial with a touch of venom. 'You'll be happy to know that my mission was a success. I'm sure you've been praying for me.'

Canoness Grace watched as Thieus, Brandt, Savdra and Devries exited down the ramp and fell in behind Ulrich. 'Where is Sister Margene?'

Ulrich met the Canoness's withering gaze and said simply, 'She died.'

Canoness Grace lifted her chin slightly. 'How?'

'Heroically.' Ulrich could tell that she was waiting for him to elaborate, but he said nothing more. Neither of them blinked. At the gate, the crowd grew louder. Several more of the meteors streaked across the sky.

Erdon and Chavis began to bring the containment cylinder down. The sight of it caused Canoness Grace to speak at last. 'What is that?'

'That,' Ulrich said, 'is the concern of the Inquisition, and not the Adepta Sororitas.' He turned his back to her and walked away to join Chavis and Erdon.

'Inquisitor Ulrich!' she shouted. 'I know that you are here conducting the business of the Ordo Xenos. If that container has anything to do with an alien life form, I demand to know about it!'

Ulrich whirled around, incredulous. 'You demand? Did I not just say that this was no business of yours?'

Canoness Grace pushed her way past the four Scions before her. 'Everything that takes place on this world is my business. I am in charge of all operations on Lysios.'

'Then I am happy to inform you that I am leaving Lysios.'

The Canoness thrust a finger at Chavis and Erdon. 'You two, open that container for inspection.'

The two Scions exchanged a glance, but did not stop.

Ulrich couldn't help but smile when he saw the Canoness's face go livid. 'Gentlemen,' he called to Savdra, Thieus, Devries, and Brandt, 'time to go.'

The four Scions started moving towards the lander's boarding ramp. Ulrich gave the Canoness a curt nod, and turned his back to her once again.

The inquisitor and the Scions were at the foot of the lander when all eight of the Canoness's command squad moved in and blocked their way. Their boltguns were in positions of readiness. Chavis and Erdon stopped, and set the cylinder down. Ulrich slowed his pace and turned around to

find Canoness Grace glaring at him.

Chavis caught the eyes of his men. Slowly, he lowered his hand to hover above the butt of his bolt pistol. Erdon and the others gave nods that were almost imperceptible. The moment this degenerated into a firefight, they would be ready.

‘Tell your Sisters to clear out of our way,’ Ulrich said to Canoness Grace.

‘Show me what you have in that canister,’ she replied.

Ulrich grasped the pommel of his sword. ‘No.’

Chavis heard the sound of something striking a metal surface. He glanced around, certain that one of the Battle Sisters was responsible. They were standing perfectly still, filled with tension. The noise, he realised, had come from inside the containment cylinder.

‘If you won’t open it,’ the Canoness said to Ulrich, ‘then I will.’

Chavis saw movement behind the glass. He opened his mouth to speak when suddenly, the tentacle slammed itself against the container. It twitched, and its cilia started waving. Its skin glowed from within as it drove its consciousness like a thunderbolt into Canoness Grace’s mind.

CHAPTER NINE

Dessecran was a night world. For ten months out of the year, the tiny planet lay in the shadow of two gas giants. For the other three months, however, the sun shone bright and clear. None of this mattered to Magda Grace, though, because she was underground where the day would never break.

The sewers ran for kilometres in all directions. Some of them were big enough to drive a tank through, while others could barely accommodate a single person. What they all had in common were the constant drip of water, the flickering lumens built at even spaces along their length, and the monsters.

Grace was thirty-two years old. She was a humble Battle Sister, and her hair was still as black as pitch. She stood ankle-deep in raw sewage, but the stench didn't bother her. She had been down here for so long that she was immune to it now. In her hands she cradled a storm bolter with double clips and a halogen light strapped to the top. Eight more magazines dangled from her belt. To her left and right, the bodies of nineteen fellow Sororitas bobbed in the mire. She was the lone survivor.

The monsters had arrived months before, raining down from the sky in bloated, slime-coated pods. At first, the people of Dessecran had thought that it was a meteor shower, but they were soon proved wrong. The pods cracked open, releasing millions of horrors that bit, and scratched, and slaughtered, and fed.

Dessecran was being invaded by tyrannids.

Rumours persisted that the Imperial Navy was on its way. Any day now, people said, a flotilla of starships would arrive in orbit and several million Imperial Guardsmen would liberate the cities. Those rumours had been circulating for eight months now. Grace doubted they would ever come true. So, the defence of Dessecran was left up to the Sororitas of the local convent. She, and others like her, were the only ones holding things together on this world.

The creature Grace was stalking was a specialised member of the warrior caste. The xenobiologists, before they had all been killed, had called it a lictor. These beasts could move swiftly and soundlessly through nearly any terrain, and were excellent at hiding. They liked to stalk individual prey, corner them, and then devour their brains. No one on Dessecran was certain why this was, but rumour had it that by eating the brain, the creature stole the memories of the person being

killed. It was certainly not beyond reason. The tyranids had displayed all manner of strange and hideous abilities since they first made planetfall. Some of them, it was said, even used sleeper agents to corrupt and take over religious enclaves.

Grace had been pursuing this particular creature for some time now, ever since it had ambushed her Canoness and devoured her brain. Every member of the convent had sworn revenge. Although it had been wounded many times, every Sister who had gone after the beast was now dead.

She wheeled around just in time to see the lictor drop from somewhere up above her. She fired her weapon. A cluster of bolts struck its chest. Bits of chitin and soupy blobs of pus exploded outward. It made a gibbering sound that might have been a cry of agony, and lashed at her with its claws. Grace tried to move aside, but the water slowed her down. The armour plates around her right shoulder were broken clean away. Ceramite fragments flew up into her face. She squeezed her eyes closed, but when she opened them again, her vision was obscured with blood. The skin above her eye and on her cheek felt as if it were on fire.

Above the lictor's shoulders sprouted a pair of segmented, serrated spikes. It drove both of them down at her. By all rights, Grace should have been ripped into three vertical sections. But her armour held fast. She thanked the Emperor, and struck the beast again in the face with her hefty storm bolter. Once more, her efforts seemed in vain.

The lictor's claws flashed across her chest like giant scissors. Grace staggered back with the impact. She glanced down, expecting to see her guts push their way out of the lacerations and spill like discarded waste into the sewer water. Instead, her breastplate was barely scratched.

'Blessed is He who is my shield,' she recited. *'Truly, the Emperor protects those who call upon Him.'*

Seconds went by with neither one of them able to inflict damage upon the other. Grace began to get the impression that the lictor was becoming angry and frustrated, if such a thing were possible.

The lictor lunged at her. She twisted to one side, and jammed the barrel of her storm bolter down against the side of its face. She pulled the trigger. The sound was deafening in the enclosed space. The dead bulk of the thing dropped into the stinking wet. She looked down at herself in awe. Her armour was torn in multiple places, but only her shoulder plate had given way. The side of her face burned like hellfire, but she considered it a blessing. From this day forward, as long as she lived, she would venerate the Emperor who had blessed her armour to such a degree, and she would eradicate the tyranid threat wherever it dared to show itself.

The Canoness staggered backwards, clutching her head. It took a moment for her to remember that she was an iron woman of eighty-three, not a thirty-two year old novice, and that she was on Lysios, not Dessecran. She touched the scar that ran along the side of her face. The creature in the containment chamber had used some kind of mental power on her, violating her thoughts and memories. The attack had taken only a heartbeat, but in that flicker of time, they had been linked.

'Inquisitor,' she said, *'order these Scions to step aside. This specimen of yours has got to be destroyed.'*

'I'll do no such thing,' Ulrich said.

Grace exhaled, well aware of the chain reaction that she was about to start. She pulled the plasma pistol from her holster and aimed it at the containment cylinder. In a blur of motion, Ulrich had his own pistol in his hand, levelled at the Canoness. Chavis drew his weapon. The Battle Sisters hoisted

their bolters. The five Scions raised their lasguns.

‘Put down your weapon, Canoness,’ Ulrich said slowly. ‘This canister is coming back with me to Terra.’

Grace blanched. ‘To Terra? Are you mad? That would mean the end of everything. Don’t you know what this thing is?’

‘Proof of a legend. And the start of a new future for me.’

‘No. No, I cannot allow this.’

Just as she began to squeeze the trigger, her weapon was knocked from her hand. She blinked. The inquisitor had dashed forward and disarmed her far faster than she had ever expected. She drew her sword. Ulrich jumped to avoid the blade as it left her scabbard.

The Canoness charged, ducking low. She slammed her entire weight into Ulrich, and sent the man tumbling. His gun clattered to the ground. He rolled, and sprang back to his feet. His own blade was out.

The Sisters and the Scions regarded one another, and backed away. By some unspoken consensus, they formed a rough circle around their respective champions. Both the Canoness and the inquisitor were wielding power weapons, and both of them were highly skilled fighters. The matter would be settled very quickly, and with at least a semblance of honour. There was no need for them to become involved.

Ulrich thrust at the Canoness once, twice, and a third time. She managed to parry the first two attacks, but the final one got past her. He lunged and then withdrew. For a second, she wasn’t sure that she’d been wounded at all. But as he danced backwards, sword held straight out before him, Grace could see blood dripping from his blade. She hadn’t even felt it bypass her armour and its blessed wards.

Grace swung at Ulrich again, hoping to lop off his legs. Instead, her blade edge stopped millimetres away from his flesh, and bounced away. There was a slight rippling around the area, like sunlight playing over water.

Grace scowled at his use of a personal force field. ‘A bit dishonest of you to use a refractor in a duel,’ she said.

Ulrich shrugged, and charged forward. He and Grace collided again in a flurry of slashes and parries. Sparks flew as their weapons touched. Then they were apart once again, surveying one another coldly.

The Canoness was panting, which she thought odd. She was in excellent shape for a woman of her age. She glanced down at herself to see that Ulrich had rent her armour just below her collar bone. She snarled.

Ulrich, for his part, shot the Canoness a look of pure, undiluted hatred, and then toppled to the ground. His chestplate was slashed clean through from left to right, and blood began to gush through the rent. He gave a grunt of disbelief, dropped his sword, and clasped both hands over the wound.

Grace sheathed her sword, and went to collect his pistol from where it had fallen.

‘Scions,’ Ulrich croaked, ‘kill them.’

Grace froze, kneeling over her gun with hand outstretched. Slowly, she lifted her face.

Across the landing field, the people pressed against the fence screamed and tried to scatter. A groundcar ploughed through them at top speed, sending bodies flying, and smashed its way through the gate. The Scions recognised its make. It was exactly like the ones they had encountered earlier in the

day.

The car barrelled straight towards them. Without a word, the Scions and the Sisters turned their weapons on it. Sister Fayhew's heavy bolter spat out round after fist-sized round. Erdon's volley gun tore three of the passengers apart. Superior Cairista and Sister Paniece, the newly-promoted bearer of the flame, covered it with gouts of promethium flame. Within seconds, the car crumpled under the combined firepower and exploded. Flaming pieces of metal radiated outwards.

Through the collapsed gate, a wave of bodies began to pour onto the field. Grace saw that many of them were dressed in the blue robes and modified diving gear of the Shelsist cult.

Grace picked up her pistol. 'Sisters, kill the heretics!' She glanced back at Chavis.

'Scions,' he shouted. 'Autonomous fire! Push them back!'

Erdon and the others rushed forward, firing their lasguns. They were joined by the Battle Sisters, who advanced on the breach with a storm of bolter fire. Yet the cultists did not break or flee. They flew apart and crumpled and turned to ashes, but onward they came, pouring through the breach. Their resolve was insane.

Two more of the disgraced governor's groundcars came flying through the collapsed gate. They skidded to a halt, and from each of them, eight figures leapt out. They might have once been human, but they were obviously no longer so. Some of them had hands that were tipped with elongated claws. Others had an additional set of arms sprouting from their ribcages. Their skin all showed varying degrees of mutation, and all of it appeared aquatic in nature: scales, shells, and tentacles covered them in haphazard places. They began to sprint forward.

Grace's sword was in her hand, still stained with the inquisitor's blood. Las-fire and bolts flew all around her, glass and flaming debris crunched beneath her heeled boots.

The mutants came at her with their claws bared. With rapid swipes, they cut at her face and chest. She lopped the head off of one of them, and impaled a second one through the centre of his chest. They attempted to surround her, so that she couldn't hope to stop them all, and pounced. Grace kicked and shoved at them. Something struck her on the top of her head and opened a wide gash. She flipped her sword around and thrust it into the soft belly of someone behind her.

There were too many of them, she realised, and their awful, hybrid nature made them faster than she. She calmly accepted the possibility that this was going to be her final fight. Then, through the blood that smeared her face, she could see that the Scions had joined her. The six of them fought with powerful, exacting moves, blocking the attacks of the mutants until they spied an opening that they could exploit. They kicked, and stamped, and used the bulk of their firearms to bash in skulls. It was a style of fighting completely different from any the Sororitas used, but in that moment, Grace was thankful for it.

From the sky came a deafening screech. A fireball plunged down from the heavens and impacted the hab-crawler very near to the landing field. The plates beneath their feet shook with the impact.

'Meteor,' Chavis yelled.

The Canoness shook her head. 'Those are no mere rocks. They're a sign. Something terrible is about to come upon us.'

As if to illustrate her point, another dark object slammed into the Taurox with a terrible velocity. The transport crumpled and detonated. The shockwave knocked everyone from their feet. Fire and smoke obscured everything.

The object in the centre of the flames cracked along one side. Thick mucus gushed out, bubbling in

the heat. Another crack appeared. One entire side of the massive egg-shape gave way, and a dozen alien shapes spilled out onto the field. Through the burning haze, Chavis saw that the Canoness was correct. The things falling from the sky were hollow pods, not solid hunks of rock. The things inside were half as tall as a man, with long tails and scythe-like talons in place of hands. Their heads were bulbous, with tooth-crammed, oversized mouths. Armour plates covered their backs. They stretched their jaws wide, and made guttural, utterly inhuman noises.

A group of twenty or more Shelsists seemed to catch their glinting black eyes. The creatures darted off towards the cultists, leaping up to slash them with their bony, bladed front limbs. Compared to their attackers, the Shelsists reacted with glacial slowness. Their spears and tridents were knocked aside with ease. The creatures pounced on them, knocking them to the ground with a combination of speed and body weight. Then they hacked the Shelsists to pieces and rabidly began to eat the remains.

The roar of turbines drowned out the world as the lander's engines began to cycle up. Grace and Chavis simultaneously looked at the place where the inquisitor had been lying. He was gone, along with the canister. The engine bells began to glow. They had only moments before the lander lifted itself skywards, and they were all vaporised by its rocket exhaust.

‘Get up!’ Chavis yelled. ‘All of you, on your feet.’

Grace pointed to the control tower. Several of the Sisters nodded and stumbled towards it. Chavis helped Erdon and Devries, and the three of them ran for the control tower doorway.

Everywhere was madness. The Shelsists continued to pour through the fence. They fired harpoons and spears at the lander. Another meteor impacted near the hab-crawler, destroying one of its treads. The entire community shuddered and ground to a halt. Steam pipes and fuel lines burst, spewing geysers of fire and water into the air.

The Scions and Sisters scrambled into the control tower. Chavis slammed the heavy blast door shut. The space was small and cramped. A staircase spiralled upwards. Outside, the Shelsists were being torn to ribbons by the scythe-limbed monstrosities.

Seconds later, the lander's engines ignited and bathed the field with super-heated clouds.

They made their way up the stairs. At the top of the tower was a circular control room. A single door led out onto the roof of an adjacent building. Chavis and the Canoness ran out through it. The landing field below them was littered with corpses and smouldering craters. The scythe-limbed aliens were nothing now but blackened husks. At the gate, a fresh wave of Shelse's followers began running towards the control tower door.

In the sky above, the lander continued to rise on a plume of rocket exhaust, taking the inquisitor with it.

The Sisters and the Scions joined their respective leaders. All around them, their enemies' numbers grew and grew. The small rooftop was becoming an island inundated by a murderous sea.

‘What are your orders, Canoness?’ Chavis said.

Grace touched her forehead, her chest, and hilt of her sword. The Sororitas mirrored her.

‘We fight, of course,’ Grace said.

Chavis nodded grimly and pointed down at the mass of cultists, mutants, and renegade soldiers. ‘Scions,’ he shouted, ‘directed firestorm sanctioned!’

Grace raised her blade above her head. ‘Emperor, grant ascension! Sisters, strike them down!’

Together they attacked the horde before them with las-fire and bolt, while all across the hab-crawler, meteor pods continued to impact, crack open and vomit out their murderous cargo into the

streets and buildings.

CODA

The canister had been a considerable load for two Tempestus Scions to carry between them. It was nearly impossible for Damien Ulrich. The exertion of dragging it up the lander's boarding ramp was causing him to bleed out, he knew. His wounds were covering everything with a slick film of blood. His vision began to swim. Still, he refused to give up; not when victory was close at hand.

At last he managed to reach the top of the ramp. He slammed his fist into the door controls, and staggered to the cockpit as the ramp slowly closed behind him. He sat down heavily in the pilot's chair, activated the launch sequence, and then reached under the control board. It took him two tries to open the emergency medi-pack. As the engines began to come to life, he grasped a thick hypodermic injector, squeezed his eyes shut, and stabbed himself in the stomach with it.

The elixir within the syringe flowed into his wounds like liquid fire. He pushed his head back into the seat's deep cushions and gasped with pain. Outside, the lander's engines ignited. The landing field was consumed in clouds of burning gas. The lander shook violently all around him.

Something clipped the lander as it rose into the air, sending it spinning wildly. Ulrich's eyes shot open, and for a moment his agony was forgotten. He grasped the controls and steadied the craft.

Outside the viewports, the skies of Lysios were choked with dark, misshapen objects. They rained down surrounded by wreaths of fire, and impacted on the surface below. Ulrich knew exactly what they were. He was of the Ordo Xenos, after all.

The atmosphere outside began to thin from blue to black. Ulrich put his head back again, and gave a weak laugh.

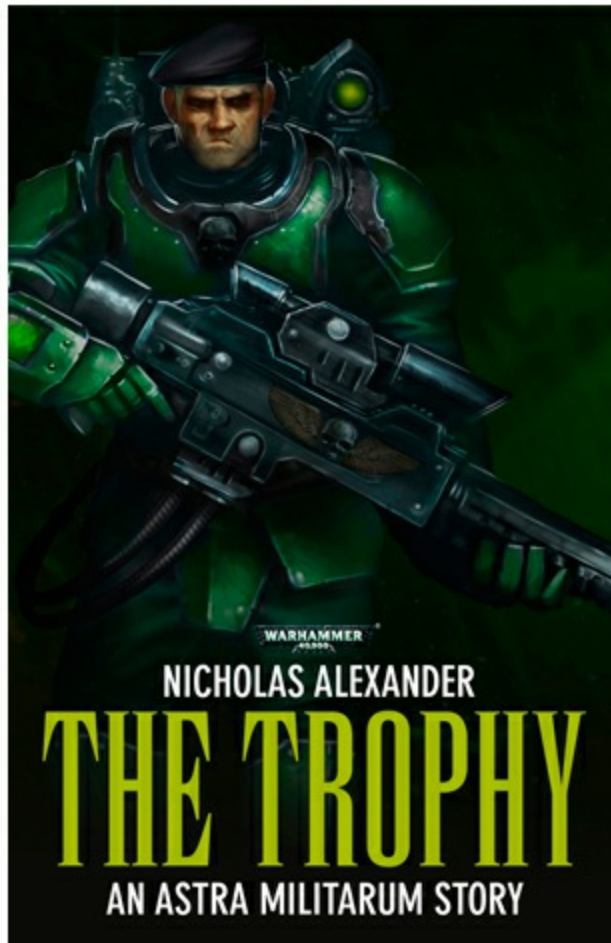
'The Shattered World,' he said aloud, knowing now what the Emperor's Tarot had been trying to tell him.

As the pain began to abate, exhaustion took over. Well, no matter, he thought. Very soon, he would dock with the ship that had brought him here, and he could relax all the way back to Terra. His chin sank down to this chest. He did not hear the tentacle banging against the inside of the containment cylinder, nor did he hear it smash its way free. He was too busy dreaming of the fine reception that would no doubt await him upon his return, and of the rewards he was sure to reap.

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Braden Campbell is the author of *Shadowsun: The Last of Kiru's Line* for Black Library, as well as several short stories featuring the dark eldar. He is a classical actor and playwright, and a freelance writer, particularly in the field of role playing games. Braden has enjoyed Warhammer 40,000 for nearly a decade, and remains fiercely dedicated to his dark eldar.

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For Holly, who misses me whenever I vanish into the grim darkness of the far future.

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