

WARHAMMER
40,000

SPACE MARINE BATTLES™

THE WORLD ENGINE

BEN COUNTER



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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.

ASTRAL KNIGHTS ORDER OF BATTLE

Varv Deliverance Mission – Battle-barge *Tempestus*

Chapter Command

Chapter Master Lord Artor Amhrad
Chaplain Masayak
Chief Librarian Hyalhi
3 Veteran Squads
Dreadnought Ancient Keldohran
Dreadnought Ancient Vhortaas
Land Raider Squadron *Penance*
Stormraven Gunship *Maxentius*
Stormraven Gunship *Damoclean*
Techmarine Sarakos
Techmarine Methelian

Second Battle Company

Captain Pelisaar
Chaplain Khurz
8 Tactical Squads
1 Assault Squad
1 Devastator Squad

Third Battle Company

Captain Sufutar
6 Tactical Squads
2 Assault Squads
2 Devastator Squads

Fourth Battle Company

Captain Mohari
6 Tactical Squads
2 Assault Squads
1 Devastator Squad

Sixth Battle Company

Captain Sheherz, Master of the Fleet
First Sergeant Kypsalah
8 Tactical Squads
2 Assault Squads

Seventh Reserve (Tactical) Company

Captain Ifriqi
Lexicanium Dehaarz
9 Tactical Squads

Eighth Reserve (Assault) Company

Assault-Captain Zahiros
9 Assault Squads

Ninth Reserve (Devastator) Company

Devastator-Captain Khabyar
Codicier Valqash
8 Devastator Squads

Tenth Scout Company

Scout-Sergeant Faraji
7 Scout Squads



*Orbital Supply Station Madrigal 12
High Polar Orbit, Safehold
Varv System*

**Encryption Code Hemlock
Inquisitorial Eyes Only. Ref. Lord Inquisitor Quilven Rhaye
Scrivened: Medicae Obscurum Kalliam Helvetar**

The package was received from an Aquila shuttle bearing the livery of the Ultramarines Chapter, and the seal of Captain Venetius placed upon the reception altar. The package was disembarked without incident.

The package was an oversized chamber 4x2.5x1.5 metres, equipped with cryonic actuator and suspensor unit. It was taken by an orderly party from the shuttle bay to the Menials' Mess Hall of the orbital station, this space being judged by this functionary as sufficient for the required procedures.

The package was identified as a cryonic storage unit, containing the corpse of one human. This corpse was oversized, approximately 2.5 metres in height with the remaining bone and muscle structure exaggerated. This functionary identified the corpse as belonging to a member of the Adeptus Astartes.

Captain Venetius is logged as remarking 'He is not one of ours' during the handover process. The corpse is not believed to originate with the Ultramarines Chapter.

The corpse suffered extensive injuries, described in detail in the addendum attached. They were not survivable and this functionary believes them to be the cause of death pending a full mortisection. The summary is of one penetrative chest wound, one penetrative abdominal wound, and radiation burns across the majority of the skin. Facial identification will be difficult, but sufficient dental and bone structure remains to make identification by speculative reconstruction possible.

The corpse was washed and non-biological material removed from the skin. The orderlies were set to cataloguing the injuries which, as they included healed injuries presumably inflicted during past engagements, took approximately six hours.

During this time a message was received from Varv Deliverance Mission Command, bearing the information seal of Lord Inquisitor Rhaye, requiring an autoseance on the corpse. As this was not the procedure anticipated by this functionary, a further five hours was required to equip the Menials' Mess Hall sufficiently, during which time the cryogenic unit was reactivated to preserve the condition of the corpse. This functionary also adjusted the cranial electroos of all orderlies present to mark them for mind-wiping at the earliest convenience following the completion of the autoseance.

The autoseance began approximately twelve hours after reception of the package. This functionary performed the initial tech-rituals to please the spirits of the psychoconductive coil, the semantic cogitator, and the holomat servitor. Sacred machine oil and void-whale wax candles were deemed appropriate, as was a ceremonial dodecagram of iron filings and bone powder. Upon the depression of all three activation panels the machine-spirits proved willing and the equipment commenced function.

Initial contact was troubling. The upper layers of the consciousness were damaged by the violence of the subject's death, as is common in deaths by combat or accident. This setback was anticipated. This functionary suffered sympathetic cardiac fluctuations and administered two ampoules of somatic stabilisers.

The procedure was commenced after a further eight hours. More cardiac monitoring

equipment was set up and the orderlies engrammed with the machine-rites required to operate it along with resuscitation techniques. The next contact lasted approximately six minutes. Fragmentary sensory patterns were located. The upper levels of the consciousness were penetrated and the uppermost layers of residual personality encountered. This functionary lacks experience of the personality-constructs of a member of an Adeptus Astartes. They exceeded the training subjects in intensity and complexity. The sensory patterns were as follows.

Upon a city drenched in sun, whipped by the salt-heavy winds off the ocean, the gilded roofs of a thousand palaces glitter like a scattering of coins. A mountain rises, its sides carved into towers and battlements, a fortress cut from the living rock hung with the banners of a mighty house. The city bears the heraldry of its lords as boldly as a coat of arms written into the land. Hunting parties sally from its walls into the forests beyond. The cries of the heralds speak of the comings and goings of this world's blessed sons.

A world hangs in the void, an obscenity of glass and steel. A sun burns beyond it, but the world's heart is cold. A lifeless planet rolls by, dragging a trail of shattered continents and corpses. The death of a thousand men is no more than a flicker against the void.

A staff, topped with a silver eagle, engraved with the words of a High Gothic prayer. It is singing, a high harmony that fluctuates along with the thoughts of the man who carries it. Into this weapon is poured all the power of the construct in the wielder's mind, a form of mental light in the shape of a many-limbed beast. This beast lies in the staff now, a predator hungry for release.

Father and mother watch as you kneel. This is not a moment to be proud. This is a moment to be humble. But pride is our sin, and it comes unbidden, demanding the mind's attention. Mother's armour is polished. Father carries his bow. Members of the family none have seen for a decade line the courtyard. You lay down your sword at your parents' feet. They say you are not their son any longer, but everyone here knows that is not true. The stag's antlers on the house banners are emblazoned across your heart. Not even the trials to come can carve that symbol out of you.

Corpses are split and reformed, knitted back into blocks of bloody meat. Humanity is erased more completely than mere death could do. The body of a man is now an object. The body of a woman is now a commodity, worth a pittance, to be stacked and moved like something that has never been alive.

This functionary suffered full cardiac and respiratory arrest. The menials present administered the tech-rites and activated the resuscitation equipment. This functionary was rendered moritum totalis for two minutes and twenty-three seconds. The procedure was suspended.

Following resuscitation, the patterns above were noted down and submitted to a menial engrammed with a symbolic filter function.

Rites of mental purification were observed approximately eighteen hours later. The ritual texts were consulted and corruption was deemed of a low enough probability to continue. The procedure commenced once more, the corpse having been again placed back in the cryonic unit during the intervening time.

Additional rituals of mental preparation were undertaken. Pre-emptive somatic stabilisers were administered by a slow drip. This functionary, having suffered muscular pains following the previous session, elected to be restrained by two menials prior to the commencement of the procedure. Machine-rites were observed as before.

The subsequent contact through the upper conscious and personality levels proved uneventful. Sense-fragments previously located were not present and could not be found. This functionary concluded this was only possible through the use of extensive mental conditioning and psyniscientific training, as evidenced further by the layers of mental protection still present through the systematic configuring of neural pathways. This made navigation lengthy but not hazardous.

Three hours after the commencement of the third contact, this functionary located a shielded cache of contiguous sensory information within the subject's deep personality. A holomat servitor was mated with the psychoconductive coil and this functionary began the rites of

unravelling. As a selective memory autoeraser protects the Inquisitorial autoseance protocols engrammed into this functionary, the details of this procedure cannot be related by this functionary. Selective recollection permits the memory of the shielding being removed layer by layer, with the endorphin spike associated with each causing subconscious activation of further protocols.

Approximately four and a half hours after the commencement of the third contact, acquisition of contiguous sensory relay was achieved.



ONE

Battle-barge Tempestus
Varv Deliverance Mission Command
Outer Solar Orbit, Varv System
Captain Sheherz, Master of the Fleet

‘That was the *Perilous*,’ said Sheherz. Through the viewscreen mounted on the bridge of the *Tempestus*, he watched the slow disintegration of the fleet’s flagship. Its long, ridged hull, crowned with a wedge-shaped prow and covered in hundreds of close-defence emplacements, was skewered on a silver lance of power that flashed into existence and fizzled to nothing a moment later. The *Perilous* simply drifted apart as if some keystone had been removed and the ship had fallen to pieces of its own accord. The prow tumbled away, the sides of the hull peeled off and the entrails of the ship poured out in a waterfall of sparks. In that torrent were the seven thousand souls who crewed the *Perilous*. One of them was Lord Admiral Corus, the supreme commander of the Varv Deliverance Fleet.

‘How many Stormfronts does that leave?’ asked the shipmistress of the *Tempestus*, Lady Demi-Admiral Gereltus. Around her the bridge crew continued to work their navigational cogitators and communication helms, trying not to stare mesmerised at the death of the flagship. Their despair was all the more intense for being silent and hidden.

‘She was the last of the Stormfront class,’ replied Sheherz.

He could not show emotion in front of these crew members, not even the shipmistress. He was an Astral Knight, a Space Marine, and not a berserker of the Space Wolves or morbid monk of the Dark Angels. Roboute Guilliman had written in the Codex Astartes of what the ordinary men and women of the Imperium must see when they look on a Space Marine – a creature impassive and unshockable, weathering defeat and victory the same, as relentless and eternal as the human race had to be in this galaxy of war.

He could not show his anger.

The silvered arc of the planet breached the edge of the viewscreen. From the void some worlds looked unholy and terrible, some mottled with disease, others blistered with volcanoes or cracked apart by the anger of their core. This world was shrouded with clouds eternally churning in an electrical storm, criss-crossed with lightning. Every visual probe had been obscured by an information haze, as if the planet knew it was being watched and clouded every eye that looked at it.

But it was not a planet – at least not a sterile and dead world such as ninety per cent of the planets in the galaxy. Somewhere beneath that mantle of cloud was a weapon that could knock a starship, even an Imperial battleship like the *Perilous*, out of the sky like an arrow through a bird. Sometimes it took the form of the silver lance that had speared the *Perilous*. Sometimes it had summoned, through some teleporter technology or warp magic, masses of rock within the target, tearing apart the *Lycomadean* and the *Viridian Sun*. Smaller ships it had crushed as if by a giant invisible fist, hull plates buckling as plasma vented in ribbons of fire.

Twelve times the Imperial fleet had engaged the World Engine. Eleven times it had been thrown back in disarray, leaving a trail of shattered spacecraft, and the World Engine had not taken a scratch.

Do not show anger. They will see it as impotence and despair. Give them something to follow, because to them you are like gods. Thus had Guilliman written. Sheherz kept his anger inside him, and felt its heat boring into the pit beneath his heart.

One of the crewmen looked up from a communications helm, his pale face lit by the green glow of the pict screen. The face was drawn and grey, the eyes dark. These men and women had not slept for a long time, because the World Engine did not sleep either. 'Captain Sheherz, Chapter Master Amhrad hails us for your attention.'

'What does he command?' asked Sheherz. He knew full well what the message said, but communications protocol had to be followed.

'The Chapter Master requests your presence,' said the crewman.

'Stay alert,' said Sheherz to the shipmistress, 'and look to the crew. Despair will poison them, you must stem its flow. I shall return to the bridge soon.'

By the time Sheherz reached the Chapel of Intolerance, the commanders of the Varv Deliverance Fleet were already there, some with their honour guard as if showing the might they brought with them still mattered when the World Engine was ploughing through their fleet at that very moment. Some Space Marine Chapters had sent only a handful of battle-brothers and were represented by a single officer, but most had not come alone. In all, fifteen Chapters were represented there.

Captain Venetius of the Ultramarines took the fore – he and his honour guard wore the characteristic deep blue armour of their Chapter, but so embellished there was more gold than blue. Instinctively, it seemed, the other Chapters had accepted Venetius as a de facto leader. Opposite him stood the Astral Knights delegation, led by Chapter Master Amhrad. Amhrad had brought with him the three veteran squads attached to his command, the most impressive body of men among them.

That was Amhrad's right. This was an Astral Knights ship.

'Captain Sheherz,' said Amhrad as Sheherz entered. 'It is well that we have the Master of the Fleet in attendance. Matters of war in the void demand your expertise.'

'My lord,' said Sheherz.

'You have seen the latest development, I take it?' said Venetius. He had the face and manner of a patrician who had gone his whole life getting his own way.

'We lost the *Perilous*,' said Sheherz.

'And the *Magna Pater*,' added Venetius. He folded his arms as if any argument had just been settled. 'This weapon swats us from the void at will. It is apparent that your formation approach failed.'

The last words were directed at Sheherz. He did not have sole responsibility for the positioning of the fleet, but he had a great deal of it, and with the death of Lord Admiral Corus he was probably the most blameworthy individual left. 'I did not anticipate the manoeuvrability nor the range of the weapon,' he said. 'It has never before shown the capabilities it has this last hour.'

'And every hour it changes!' barked Venetius. 'Each ship we lose in a new way. It learns from us and adapts to every tactic.'

'Then what,' said Amhrad levelly, 'do you suggest we do?'

'Pull back,' said Venetius. 'Regroup the fleet and await reinforcement from the segmentum fleet. Within two months they will be here, and if the Emperor wills it they will bring with them the Adeptus Mechanicus survey teams to tell us what this World Engine is.'

'Out of the question,' said Amhrad.

Venetius slammed a fist into his palm. 'Why?' he demanded.

'Captain Sheherz,' said the Chapter Master.

Amhrad had primed Sheherz on his role in the communication sent to the bridge. Sheherz switched to the bridge vox-link. 'Shipmistress, route the tactical readout to the chapel hololith,' he said.

The hololith device was mounted among the incense burners hanging from the ceiling. It lit up

and unfolded, and shapes of static-lined light flickered into being in the centre of the room.

The hologram projected between Amhrad and Venetius was of the Varv system. It had eleven planets, with the seventh from the sun being the sparsely settled world of Safehold over which the fleet was formed. The outermost world was a ball of frozen ammonia that had never known life, but until recently the next two had held chemical mines and pioneer settlements. The World Engine had obliterated the life on those worlds without pausing in its path through the system, puncturing fortified towns with blasts of las or creating masses of rock, like planetary tumours, to rip chemical refineries apart from the inside.

‘The fourth world,’ said Amhrad. ‘I take it you have apprised yourself of its significance?’

The hologram zoomed in on the fourth planet from the Varv system’s sun. It was a blistered and blackened orb, crazed with deep artificial canyons, its surface divided into expanses of rockcrete like grey scales.

‘Varvenkast,’ said Venetius.

‘It is more than just a name,’ said Amhrad. ‘It is twenty-one billion souls.’ Amhrad now addressed all the Space Marines who had come here to speak for their Chapters. ‘We have known for weeks it would come to this. The World Engine has already claimed a dozen inhabited worlds. We have lost Imperial citizens beyond counting. But when the World Engine reaches the hives of Varvenkast, the death toll will more than triple. If ever we are to stop it, we must do so now.’

‘The loss of every innocent life pains me as much as it does you, Chapter Master,’ said Venetius. ‘Guilliman taught all his sons the value of those who toil under the Emperor’s gaze. But every attempt we have made to engage the World Engine has failed. Our weapons cannot penetrate whatever form of shields it has. Our own shields are no proof against its weaponry. We cannot even see what lies on its surface. And the fate of the *Perilous* shows that even trying to keep pace with it is death. As much as these words are bile in my mouth, we must abandon this engagement and regroup with the means to fight this battle on our own terms.’

‘You would leave the billions on Varvenkast to die?’ asked Amhrad.

‘If we stand and fight, we shall all be lost, and Varvenkast will be destroyed anyway. So yes, Chapter Master, I would leave them to die.’

Sheherz looked from one face to the next. When the Varv Deliverance Fleet had been convened to intercept the World Engine, the lords of the fleet had each consecrated their own shrine in the Chapel of Intolerance and the Space Marine delegates stood before their Chapter’s respective shrines. The Ultramarines shrine displayed the standard of Captain Venetius’s Seventh Company, among the spears and shields of warriors from their home world of Macragge. The Red Consuls displayed an image of Roboute Guilliman taken from a desecrated temple liberated by the Chapter, still stained with the blood of the believers who had fallen defending it. The Invaders had created a shrine of bronze shields, assembled in a gleaming pyramid, a trophy of victory from an ancient battlefield. Sheherz could see no doubt on any of their faces – they had all come to the chapel of one mind, probably led by Venetius in the decision to abandon the engagement and await reinforcements.

It was the word of the Codex, after all. If a battle cannot be won, neither throw away your lives fruitlessly nor flee in cowardice. Rather, create a new battle, one fought under your terms. Roboute Guilliman had written it in the Codex Astartes ten thousand years ago, and every good Ultramarine treated their primarch’s words as sacred.

‘Then you shall,’ said Chapter Master Amhrad. ‘Thus your conscience commands you. The Astral Knights shall not stand in your way.’

‘It is decided,’ said Venetius. ‘My brothers! Return to your commands. Make ready to break formation and...’

‘But the Astral Knights shall not,’ said Amhrad.

‘Damnation, Amhrad!’ called out Lord Zethar of the Red Consuls, who had watched the debate wordlessly but clearly in favour of Venetius. ‘This is not a game! You may have brought your entire Chapter to this battle but you cannot play games of politics when this whole mission is at stake.’

‘No politics,’ said Amhrad. ‘The Astral Knights will fight here. You have the fleet, my brothers, and do with it as the Codex demands.’

‘You play our consciences,’ retorted Zethar. ‘By threatening to throw yourselves into a last stand, you demand we die alongside you!’

‘Not a last stand,’ said Amhrad. ‘I speak of victory. While there is a chance for it, we shall pursue it. I have no intention of exposing you to the risks should we fail.’

‘And what victory will you find here?’ asked Venetius. ‘What weapon have we not sent against the World Engine?’

‘The weapon you stand on even now,’ replied Amhrad.

‘The *Tempestus*?’ asked Venetius.

‘And a Chapter of the Emperor’s Space Marines,’ said Amhrad.

‘Have you forgotten?’ said Captain Morgrom of the Invaders. His face was a wide, battered expanse of leather, contrasting with the polished deep green of his armour. ‘I sent three squads of Terminator-armoured brothers by teleport onto the World Engine. Its shields sent them back twisted and dead.’

‘The *Tempestus* will not use its teleporters,’ said Amhrad. ‘As you say, they have been tried and have failed, as have lasers, lances and torpedoes. But we have not tried one of the fleet’s ships itself as a delivery mechanism.’

‘You mean,’ said Venetius, not bothering to hide his incredulity, ‘to crash into the World Engine?’

‘The *Tempestus* will be obliterated!’ scoffed Lord Zethar.

‘Not so,’ said Sheherz.

The other delegates had forgotten Sheherz was there, and they rounded on him as one as if he had spoken a dire insult.

‘The *Tempestus* was laid down in the dockyards of Ryza,’ continued Sheherz. ‘Four thousand years ago. Only six such battle-barges were ever constructed, and only three still sail. The secrets of their construction have long been lost. But each of the Ryzan class were renowned for the steadfastness of their construction. They were built to run minefields and asteroid blockades. Impacts that would break another ship apart can be suffered by a Ryzan without destruction. That the *Tempestus* still takes to the void after the battles she has seen is testament to that.’

‘You could fly this ship into a planet?’ asked Venetius.

‘She would not fly off again,’ said Sheherz. ‘And to my knowledge such a thing has never been done, not deliberately. But perhaps, with great damage, she would retain enough integrity to deliver a complement of troops.’

‘Perhaps,’ echoed Venetius. ‘That is all you can give me, Amhrad? Perhaps?’

‘It is better than definitely not,’ said Amhrad. ‘Once on the surface, my Chapter’s aim will be to disable the World Engine’s shielding. If the rest of the fleet remains close by, it can take advantage of that vulnerability to finally blast the World Engine out of the void. I do not ask that it remains engaged, only that it stays within striking distance.’

‘So,’ said Morgrom, ‘one final flourish from the Astral Knights.’

‘No greater an indulgence than your teleporter assault,’ said Amhrad. ‘And I act for the sake of Varvenkast. I care nothing here for glory.’

‘An Astral Knight not moved by glory?’ said Venetius. ‘Of all the Emperor’s finest, none of us could name a Chapter more moved by laurels and acclaim than the Astral Knights.’

‘And what does it matter why?’ said Amhrad. ‘A ram attack will breach the World Engine’s shields as conventional and energy weaponry cannot. A Chapter of Space Marines is as potent a boarding force as exists in this galaxy. There is no greater chance for victory. I would say there is no other chance at all. The Codex demands much of us, but above all it demands victory, and it is to victory I must dedicate every effort unto death. I have not convened us here to ask for your permission, my brothers. I have brought you here that you might know why the *Tempestus* will shortly break formation, and know how to act according to whatever might follow. I must ask now that you leave my ship, for I would not presume to take you all along to

such a destination.'

'This is no more than a gesture, Amhrad, and you know it,' snarled Venetius. He took a step dangerously close to the Chapter Master. 'And I did not risk myself and two companies of my brethren so you could sacrifice yourselves in a grand display of superiority. This strikeforce needs this ship. You have a whole Chapter of Space Marines and it needs them too. This battle will be won, but it will be won by unity. It will be won by all of us.'

'Do you wish to take command?' said Amhrad. 'It is written all over you, Venetius. Isn't that what the Ultramarines do best?'

'Better, it seems, than you.'

'Then take it!' retorted Amhrad. 'The Codex is clear on how it is to be done, be it bare hands, or blades, or bolt pistols at fifty paces. Best me and take command of the fleet, and do with it what you will. But that is how you will have to do it, because I will not relinquish the fulfilment of my Chapter's duty while I still stand. And Captain Venetius Oricalcor of the Ultramarines, take what glory in it you can, because shortly there will be nothing left to command!'

The holo-display shifted to a streaming list of data. It resembled a roll call of the dead from some great battle, but each line did not represent a single soldier. It represented dozens – hundreds, thousands, sometimes millions of lives.

'The *Penitent*,' said Amhrad. 'The *Magna Pater*. The *Siege of Korv*, the *Malicious*, Sabre Group Omicron. Should I go on? The World Engine will not stop just because you back away and hand it Varvenkast as an offering. And what then? Will you move in to destroy it once it has finished its feasting? Or run again, and watch it devour one world after another? There will be no sudden epiphany that tells you how to defeat it. Your choices will be to yield before it, or stand and fight and be destroyed. I alone have suggested any other choice, and I will take it if I can. But if you wish to preside over this disaster, for that is what it is, then now is the time. We have no lack of weaponry in this room and no shortage of brothers to witness it. Take my command, Venetius, but be sure first that you want it.'

Sheherz did not know Captain Venetius of the Ultramarines. Perhaps he was the sort of man who was willing to cross that threshold, to take up arms against another Space Marine. Perhaps he believed so completely that the fleet would find some way to battle the World Engine without being knocked out of the sky first. If that was the case then the two would fight, because Sheherz knew his Chapter Master would not back down.

Venetius turned away from Amhrad and walked back to join his own honour guard. 'You're insane, Amhrad,' he called across the chapel floor.

'We all have our reputations,' Amhrad said.

The moment passed. Sheherz could feel the danger bleeding out of the room. The other delegations could feel it, too, as they released tensed muscles and held breaths. Venetius did not look like a man who had just backed down, but that was what he had done.

The conclave broke up in silence, for there was nothing now left to say. The Astral Knights had chosen their path and none were willing to take the steps required to turn them from it. Venetius led the delegations out, glowering at anyone who looked at him.

'This is the first battle I will fight today,' said the Chapter Master at Sheherz's approach. 'To these other Chapters it is typical of the Astral Knights to go our own way and expect them to accommodate us. The Red Consuls strip away everything they were before recruitment, they are soldiers and no more. The Invaders have no time for politics at all, they would far rather be up to their elbows in the dead. And the Ultramarines think themselves the model of a Space Marine Chapter and anyone who does not follow the Codex as they do is wayward or worse. We shall have to leave them to their convictions, captain. We do what we must do.'

'I ran the machine-spirit models of the World Engine's shielding,' said Sheherz, 'and I saw that a low-velocity body might breach it. But I had no idea this was what you had in mind, Chapter Master.'

'Do you agree with Venetius, that this plan is insane?'

'Not insane, my lord, but...'

'But what?'

For a moment, Sheherz could not find the words. 'The *Tempestus* will not survive.'

'Indeed she will not. Even if she retains her hull integrity she will never sail again. If the World Engine is destroyed she will go with it. Is this the basis for an objection to our course of action?'

'I know it should not stand in the way of our duty. But my lord, the *Tempestus* is the most ancient of our fleet, and one of the finest ships any Chapter can muster. Her machine-spirit is as old as the forge world where her keel was laid. She has weathered storms greater than perhaps any other ship in the Imperium could survive. Though I shall follow your orders, as every Space Marine must the commands of his Chapter Master, yet I cannot contemplate the death of this ship without feeling as if I am watching the death of a friend.'

'I understand, captain. The *Tempestus* has always been as a brother to the Master of the Fleet.' Amhrad turned to Sheherz – his skin was dark and battered, with a dozen long-service studs in his forehead and a flat, oft-broken nose. His was the face of a pugilist as well as a commander, and it carried as much authority with a glance as Venetius might with a speech. 'But my orders are my orders. Though they pain me and those who must execute them, they serve a cause beyond ourselves. Place your misgivings at the back of your mind, to be faced when the battle is won. Until then, there is nothing but to serve.'

'Of course, my lord. If we are to move immediately, I must tend to the machine-spirit. It must be counselled in navigating our approach.'

'See to it, captain,' said Amhrad. 'And it will not go forgotten that few would have the courage to speak of their doubts.'

'I would not do so before the brothers of my company,' said Sheherz. 'But from the master of my Chapter, there can be no secrets.'

The last of the delegates had left the Chapel of Intolerance, hurrying to rejoin their ships before the *Tempestus* broke formation with the rest of the fleet. Sheherz and Amhrad took different paths, Amhrad towards the command bridge, and Sheherz towards the armoured core deep within the ship.

The magi of Ryza had forged the very first part of the *Tempestus* around the ancient cogitator that contained its machine-spirit. Even before they had laid the first beams of the battle-barge's keel, they had constructed a housing for the cogitator that dated back to the pre-Imperial history of Mars itself. Such spirits were rare and irreplaceable, relics of the Dark Age of Technology where other such spirits had, legend had it, become a threat to the very species that had made them. Now only the wisest and most trustworthy had survived the purges of the Age of Strife, and were numbered among the oldest relics of humankind.

Around that spirit had been built the *Tempestus*, a voidgoing war machine granted by bonds of ancient fealty from the priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to the Space Marines of the Adeptus Astartes. The ship became the most powerful weapon in the arsenal of the Astral Knights, and a succession of Masters of the Fleet took her as their flagship. While her weaponry was of ancient and powerful marks and her structure made sound with alloys and techniques all but lost to the Mechanicus, it was her spirit that made her the weapon she was. Locked in the stacks of datamedium was battle-wisdom from wars that had vanished from the memory of mankind.

Every move the ship's crew made was shadowed by the spirit, assisted or even ignored in accordance with that wisdom. The Master of the Fleet had to treat the spirit of the *Tempestus* as another member of the Chapter or they would find their helm commands ignored as the spirit made its own decisions. When they showed the ship the respect due to such an ancient warrior, they found in the *Tempestus* an ally as close as any battle-brother.

The cogitator core was kept hot, to maintain the liquidity of the crystalline medium that ran through the cylindrical datastacks. The stacks formed transparent stalagmites and stalactites through which the black datamedium pulsed, so as Sheherz walked between them it seemed he was walking through a set of enormous jaws filled with black fangs. The cogitator's valve banks rose and fell overhead like floating islands, exuding clouds of steam and scalding droplets.

Sheherz approached the tangle of looped cables and steel spines, the image of an exploding star created by an artist in hot metal and wire. It was the closest thing the *Tempestus* had to a heart, where the machine-spirit interfaced with the systems of the ship.

‘If you can hear,’ said Sheherz, ‘then I must speak with you. I have never done this before. Perhaps the Masters of the Fleet who went before me have, I do not know. But I would not send a brother into a battle from which I did not expect him to return, without telling him so to his face. And so I must tell you, as well.’

The *Tempestus* did not reply. The machine-spirit exercised its will in subtle ways, a few degrees of yaw or a per cent higher or lower in reactor output. To respond directly would be beneath the ancient machine.

Sheherz activated a holomat unit on the front of the machine-spirit core. Here was the output for the machine-spirit’s simulations, taking billions of fragments of data and collating them into a prediction of how a fleet engagement would play out. This was the means by which the machine-spirit communicated its wishes and intentions, sometimes constructing wild and improbable simulations, or pointedly demonstrating how a particular course of action would lead to disaster.

The disposition of the Varv Deliverance Fleet appeared in glowing shapes of light. The gravitational threshold of the nearest planet, Safehold, glowered darkly some distance across the chamber. The World Engine was a scarcely less imposing presence, a moon-sized aberration picked out in bright silver and surrounded by a halo of information noise illustrating how little intelligence the fleet’s sensors had divined.

With the loss of the *Perilous* the fleet had scattered out of its previous formation. It was anchored around the three remaining capital ships – the *Tempestus* herself, the Oberon-class *Fall of Horst*, and the ancient grand cruiser *Vengeant Aeternam*. Almost fifty smaller ships – escorts, frigates, transports and sensor-ship outrunners – made up the rest of the fleet. As a battlefleet it was depleted and ragged. Before it had begun the first engagements with the World Engine it had been more than twice as large. Almost its entire fighter fleet had been destroyed by early attempts to bombard the equatorial weapons port from which the World Engine’s ship-killer had fired. Since then the fleet had kept a wide formation in a crescent around what they presumed to be the World Engine’s stern, out of the weapon’s scope, but as had been illustrated with the death of the *Perilous* there was nowhere any ship could truly be safe.

‘We must break formation,’ said Sheherz. ‘The rest of the fleet will fall back. We will approach. Full engine burn, all speed ahead. Bow-first into the enemy, *Tempestus*. That is our course.’

The holomat’s projection shifted. The rest of the fleet broke apart and reformed thousands of kilometres away while the *Tempestus* flew in high over the World Engine’s northern pole. The World Engine spun on its axis in response, bringing the *Tempestus* closer to its kill-arc.

‘Can we make it?’ asked Sheherz.

The *Tempestus* met the outline of the World Engine, and vanished in a burst of information static.

‘Master of the Fleet,’ came a voice from the chamber entrance. Sheherz dismissed the hologram and turned to see Librarian Hyalhi walking between the datamedium stalactites. ‘I was told you would be here, ministering to our ship.’

‘I go to the source,’ said Sheherz. ‘I command my ship from the helm, but on this occasion I decided to ask her opinion in person.’

‘And what does she say?’

‘We should reach the World Engine,’ said Sheherz. ‘We have the speed. But there is no simulation that can say what will happen when we get there.’

The glimmers of light from the datamedium caught the edges of Hyalhi’s blue armour. The colours of the Astral Knights were silver-white and blue, but Hyalhi’s was the deep blue of a Librarian to mark him out as a psychic weapon on the battlefield. One shoulder pad bore the horned skull of the Chapter Librarium, and several books locked with gilded clasps hung from his waist. He wore the demi-cloak of an Astral Knights officer, and his face was half-hidden in the psychic protection circuits of his armour’s aegis hood. What could be seen of Hyalhi’s face

was dark and old, the eyes pale grey.

‘I have never seen this place,’ said Hyalhi.

‘I rarely suffer another to enter,’ replied Sheherz.

‘Then forgive my trespass.’

‘I take it you do not come here on a whim,’ said Sheherz. ‘Librarian Hyalhi is not one given to conversation. I have not shared more than a hundred words with you in all my service, though we are both officers of the same Chapter.’

‘I keep my own counsel,’ said Hyalhi, ‘and offer it only when it is asked. The Chapter Master suggested I offer you that counsel now.’

Sheherz straightened up, immediately defensive. ‘The course of the *Tempestus* has been set,’ he said, ‘and she is at full battle orders. The ship is ready, and so are her crew.’

‘Yet,’ said Hyalhi, ‘you have misgivings.’

When it came to his ship, Sheherz was proud. He knew that. He had earned it, for his mastery of the fleet and kinship with the *Tempestus* was a powerful war asset for the Chapter. His first instinct was to brush off any suggestion of doubt, and send Hyalhi back to the mustering deck with a new appreciation for the Master of the Fleet’s authority on board. But there was no point, he told himself, in lying.

‘We were created to know no fear,’ said Sheherz, ‘but that does not mean we cannot feel sorrow, or even doubt. I have long been ready for my own death, Brother Hyalhi. That has never held any apprehension for me. I would welcome it if it was in the Emperor’s service. But now I know I have never been ready for the death of my Chapter. If we reach the surface of the World Engine, how many of us will leave it alive? We have no understanding of what lies down there save that it has the power and the will to destroy worlds. Will we face an army? An unsurvivable world that kills us as soon as we set foot on it? And into this complete unknown will fall my entire Chapter. We will be blind and beset by Throne knows what enemies. We left barely thirty battle-brothers on Obsidia. Not nearly enough to refound the Chapter. If we are swallowed up by the World Engine the Astral Knights will be gone. Our history will end. That is what causes me to doubt.’

‘It is a rare honesty that causes an Astral Knight to admit to doubt,’ said Hyalhi.

‘You are a psyker,’ replied Sheherz. ‘There isn’t much point in trying to hide it.’

‘It is more than our Chapter that is at stake,’ said Hyalhi. ‘You know where we are, captain. Varvenkast lies in the World Engine’s path.’

‘And our duty is to save its citizens,’ said Sheherz. ‘But at the cost of all of us? With no guarantee there will even be a battle to fight, let alone victory? If Varvenkast is lost it will be a tragedy, but if we are lost, all those who might be saved in the future will be lost with us. I will obey my Chapter Master, as is my duty, but I fear he is being short-sighted in condemning all our futures to save a single world.’

Hyalhi examined the intricate machinery of the machine-spirit core as if it was a strange sculpture to be appreciated. ‘If you were to boil down the essence of our Chapter,’ he said, ‘what would you be left with?’

‘Valour,’ said Sheherz. ‘Strength. Glory.’

‘And without those?’ asked Hyalhi. ‘If we were left without strength, and stripped of our courage. If all our glory were erased. What would we have left, Captain Sheherz?’

Sheherz thought for a moment. It was impossible to imagine the Astral Knights weak and afraid. Such a thing was obscene. If it were not for Hyalhi’s rank, his words would be insubordinate. But a single concept caught in his mind, something that could never be taken away. ‘Our honour,’ he said.

‘Honour,’ repeated Hyalhi. ‘We might be broken down and rendered helpless, but we will always have our honour. When all else is lost that honour is our proof against defeat, for there can never be complete catastrophe if honour is satisfied. The Astral Knights keep our word. We stand beside our brethren.’ He stopped examining the core and looked right at Sheherz, and his grey eyes seemed to strip away the layers of Sheherz’s mind. ‘And we make right our failings.’

‘The failure to destroy the World Engine is not ours alone,’ said Sheherz. ‘And it is far from

certain we will make it right.'

'I am not speaking of the World Engine,' said Hyalhi. 'It is evident to me that Lord Amhrad has not told you of the matter of honour we face. But given your doubts, I believe you need to know. If you will hear it, Sheherz. It is not something that can be unheard.'

'If it gives me a cause to take my brothers and this ship to their deaths,' said Sheherz, 'then yes, I must hear it.'

The Varv Deliverance Fleet followed the formation orders sent out from the bridge of the *Tempestus*. They fell back to leave the *Tempestus* as the tip of the fleet's spear, its flanks unprotected by the escort squadrons and sensor-ships.

The *Tempestus* adopted a high polar attitude to the World Engine, on the opposite side from the projected location of its primary weapon. The fleet's few remaining fighter squadrons accompanied the battle-barge to the edge of the World Engine's gravity well, then peeled off into a wide picket as sensor blips flickered across their tac-readouts. Hundreds of fragments of information billowed from the World Engine's equator like a swarm of insects from a hive.

In the earliest engagements with the World Engine, this scene had been repeated many times. Approaching ships were accosted by flights of fighter craft launched from somewhere beneath the sensor-proof shielding of the World Engine, and terrible tolls had been reaped among the crews of the Varv Deliverance Fleet. But while the fleet could rarely replace lost fighters and crews, the World Engine's swarms seemed to vanish beneath its shielding and emerge with their numbers replenished. The battles had been abandoned as pointless, and it was only now that the Imperial fighter crews flew in anger again.

The *Tempestus*'s sensor-broadcasts became intermittent as junk information filled the void. As communications threatened to cease completely, the fleet's other ships all sent their message to the *Tempestus*, knowing it might be the last message they ever sent to their sister battleship.

Emperor's speed, Tempestus.

Shed their blood, Tempestus.

Return to us in victory, sister.

Whatever you find, kill them all.

'Hard to port ventral!' ordered Sheherz and in response the ship lurched under him, the grav-units on the *Tempestus* not quite enough to compensate for the sudden change.

On the viewscreen, its image enhanced with constant sensor updates, the silvery flocks of enemy fighters drew a wide crescent above the *Tempestus*. Friendly craft edged in green rose up to meet them, hurtling past the nose of the battle-barge as they moved to engage.

'Tactical counts five hundred enemy in the void,' came the voice of one bridge crewman. The information pouring in formed rows of figures and symbols on secondary viewscreens. Sheherz preferred to keep most such information in his head, picturing the unfolding engagement as if it were projected into his mind by the machine-spirit's holomat.

The friendly fighters numbered rather less than two hundred. Half of them were from the escort carrier squadron Sabre, the *Vengeant Aeternam*, and the carrier platform *Merciless*. The rest were orphan squadrons, fighters whose parent carriers had been destroyed.

'Power to dorsal batteries,' said Sheherz. 'Bring our nose up, we'll hit them bow-on. Damage control parties to forward stations.'

Most of his orders were being followed before he gave them, the inevitabilities of void combat compelling the crew to prepare the ship for bloodshed.

Most of the crew did not know the true nature of their destination. The bridge crew did by necessity, for they had created the charts and vectors that put the *Tempestus* on an intercept course with the World Engine. If any of them had voiced horror at the prospect, it had not reached Sheherz's ears. These were crew bonded to the Astral Knights Chapter, and were expected to face death in the void if the Chapter demanded it. Shipmistress Gereltus would not permit anyone on her bridge who would show dismay at the prospect of this suicide mission, but

that did not mean none of them felt it now.

The crew would die. Sheherz knew that. It had been a thought flickering at the back of his mind the moment Amhrad voiced his plan to use the *Tempestus* as a weapon. A Space Marine, especially the Master of the Fleet, could not let that thought get in the way of the choices he had to make. It was not something he was proud of. It was just the way he had to be.

'Lord captain,' said the crewman at the ship's security helm, a leathery old stalwart who usually kept silent when the *Tempestus* was in combat. 'Are we prepared for boarding?'

The World Engine had never sent out boarders before – if it had, the Astral Knights would have some idea about just who or what commanded it. That did not mean, of course, that it had not been saving that trick for just such an occasion as this.

'Keep the security details back to assist damage control,' said Sheherz. 'If a Chapter of Space Marines cannot deal with boarders, then nothing can.'

In the muster decks of the *Tempestus* the whole Chapter was gathered. There had barely been room for the hundreds of battle-brothers, almost three times the complement a battle-barge typically carried. The Chapter had the barest minimum of vehicles and other heavy equipment, because no one could say how useful they would be down on the surface.

One bridge screen showed composite pict-grabs of the alien fighters. They were crescent-shaped with the points of their curved wings set forward. They had twin engines and cannon, and no obvious cockpit or entry hatches. Their metal had a strange shifting quality, squared spirals rippling across the surface. They had no livery or markings on the bare metal.

'Brace!' came the warning from the sensorium helm. The crewmen on the bridge dropped onto the deck or held on to the architectural carvings on the walls. The viewscreen showed the images from the sensors on the prow of the *Tempestus* as the shoal of enemy fighters split into three squadrons and spiralled towards the ship, livid green blasts of energy already streaking across the void.

The deck shuddered as the fighters peeled off and hurtled down the flanks of the *Tempestus*. Las-fire hammered against the hull plating. The image shuddered and broke apart into static as the prow sensors were shattered by the fire rattling against the ship's nose. Damage warnings were already blaring somewhere in the ship nearby.

Sheherz recognised the vibrations of the plasma batteries and las-broadsides firing in response, punctuated by the thin roar of missile turrets disgorging their payloads. The turrets covered the sides of the *Tempestus*, and firing in their close defence configuration created a distinctive thump through the structure of the ship. It felt like the anger of the machine-spirit, a distant roar of rage.

Sparks flew from one of the many bridge cogitators as a power surge burned out its circuits. One of the bridge crew sprayed an extinguisher over the fire. The lights on the bridge, already kept dim, flickered low as the power fluctuated again.

'Report!' ordered the shipmistress.

'Port turrets down to seventy per cent,' came the reply from one of the damage control helms.

'Starboard at sixty-five.'

'Tactical helm!' demanded Sheherz. 'Where are the enemy?'

'Astern,' replied the crewman at the tactical helm. He had been scorched by the short-lived fire but remained at his post. 'They're staying in our wake.'

Then the enemy knew what it was doing. The wake of the ship, directly behind the engine, made for hazardous flying but hampered the laser turrets' targeting. 'They're going to hit us again,' said Sheherz. 'They'll come in before our damage control teams get into position.'

'They've done for enough Imperial ships to know their weaknesses,' said the shipmistress.

'Astral Knights do not have weaknesses,' said Sheherz. 'Order the fighters to engage. All of them. All stop, reverse thrusters engage. Turn us hard to port.'

It was a bizarre order, but the crew of the *Tempestus* obeyed without pause. Even if he had not been the Master of the Fleet, he was the only man the machine-spirit trusted. That on its own would have been enough.

The ship yawed violently. Anything not stowed was thrown around the bridge. Helm crew too

slow to brace were thrown off their feet. The engine pitch, that ever-present thrum that became inaudible after months on board, shifted to the high whine of the prow thrusters. The ship decelerated and again it lurched.

In the intricate game of voidbound combat, the rules of physics were there to be bent. The *Tempestus* had the agility of a far smaller ship, enough for it to slow suddenly and turn to present one side of its hull to bear. The firepower of the battle-barge was in its broadsides, its long-range lance batteries and arrays of laser turrets. The enemy fighters had first aimed to hit the upper hull, and Sheherz had given them the prow. Now they wanted to strike the engines and plasma reactors near the stern, but Sheherz had no intention of becoming such a target. Instead he would give them the full power of a battle-barge's bombardment. If the hostile fighters wanted another swing at the *Tempestus*, they were going to have to earn it through a gauntlet of fire.

The static on the viewscreen cleared. In place of the pict-grabs from the prow the machine-spirit now presented images taken from the Imperial fighters engaging the host of enemy craft. The Imperial fighters were outnumbered and Sheherz saw they were dying already, bursting in silent explosions of silver to the longer-ranged enemy fire.

'Man the broadside!' ordered Sheherz. 'Everything we have!'

The port flank of the *Tempestus* slewed round to face the fighter battle. More Imperial ships were knocked from the void, imploding into showers of wreckage like bursting fireworks.

'Tactical, give me targets!' said Sheherz.

'Twenty per cent of the enemy in barrage range,' was the reply.

The lances were not accurate enough to pick off a fighter craft, but in enough numbers the weight of their fire would shred a significant percentage of fighters in close range.

'Have the fighters break towards us,' said Sheherz. 'Draw them in.'

Already almost a quarter of the Imperial fighters were gone. A face-to-face engagement could only ever result in the destruction of the fighter force, but it was necessary.

Sheherz's mind turned to the men and women of the fighter crews. A handful would live through the battle, if that. But he quickly recalled what Librarian Hyalhi had told him, the enormity of it. The sacrifice was grave, but there was never any question of its worth.

'Forty per cent!' called out the tactical crewman.

'Fires on decks nineteen through forty-one,' reported the damage control helm.

'Despatch damage control,' said Sheherz. The shipmistress immediately began reeling off a series of orders for containing the fires. They were close to the ship's plasma reactors. In any other situation they would be Sheherz's priority. Not now.

'Sixty per cent!'

Three out of every five enemy fighters were within the kill-box created by the broadside weapons. When the Imperial fighters were gone, the enemy would break formation and loop out of that zone to attack from the stern. If, that was, they were still flying.

'Broadsides fire!' ordered Sheherz. 'Everything! Everything we have!'

The *Tempestus* rocked under the force of its scores of lasers and turrets erupting at once. The viewscreen filled up with firing angles, illuminating the void with a cross-hatching of light.

'We're going to lose reactor nine!' said damage control.

'Shut it down and seal it off!' ordered the shipmistress.

Another volley shuddered through the ship. The enemy fighters were caught in its web and ships were sheared in two or spitted lengthways by blades of las. The survivors broke and fled, weaving through the firestorm, all formation gone.

The Imperial fighters were caught in it, too. They fared better, for they had a few seconds' warning before the broadside was launched. But many were simply too close to break out of the kill-box. They spiralled to destruction as their hulls were punctured or their fuel cells ripped open.

Sacrifices. They all had to make them, Imperial Navy crewman and Space Marine. The fighter crews had known that the moment they first strapped themselves into a trainer's cockpit. Sheherz acknowledged the winking of the viewscreen icons from green to black, and put them

out of his mind.

‘Bring us back on course,’ he ordered. ‘Full power.’

‘Nine is down,’ said damage control. ‘Fires in the generatorium chamber. Sealed off.’

‘How many inside?’ asked the shipmistress.

‘Twenty-three,’ said damage control.

There were twenty-three men and women locked up in the chamber where reactor nine was burning. The shipmistress should not have asked the question, thought Sheherz. Their sacrifice was no different to that of anyone else on the *Tempestus*.

The ship’s attitude pitched and its main engines flared again, putting it back on course for the World Engine. The World Engine itself was turning to catch the *Tempestus* in the arc of its main weapon. Even without making all the calculations, Sheherz could see it was close. Pausing to break up the fighter assault had cost them enough time for the World Engine’s controllers to react.

The enemy fighter force had been cut in half. It was regrouping now, individual fighters wheeling around to adopt formation before making another assault. The assault would hit and this time there wasn’t much the *Tempestus* could do about it. Sheherz left that question in the hands of the Emperor.

‘My lord,’ said Sheherz into the Astral Knights vox-link. ‘Are we in good order?’

‘It was rough,’ replied Chapter Master Amhrad from the muster decks, where the companies of the Astral Knights were gathered. ‘But we report no losses.’

‘Impact in nine minutes,’ said Sheherz. ‘I wish I were there with my brethren, Chapter Master.’

Sheherz was technically the captain of the Sixth Company, but his duties as Master of the Fleet meant he rarely fought alongside them. Most such titles were ceremonial, and their holders bore arms aside their brethren like any other Space Marine, but the Astral Knights Master of the Fleet had always stood apart. Sheherz had always assumed, through his earning of his power armour and his career in the Sixth Company, that however far he rose he would do it shoulder to shoulder with his fellow Astral Knights. But he understood the *Tempestus* as few could, and the captaincy of the Sixth Company took him further from his brethren, not closer to them.

Sheherz left command of the Sixth on the ground to First Sergeant Kypsalah. His company was gathered alongside the rest of the Chapter in the cavernous muster decks, waiting for whatever might happen when the *Tempestus* broke through the veil around the World Engine and crash-landed on its surface. None of them knew what they might find, whether the ship would be annihilated in an instant or whether they would find themselves surrounded by a horde of enemies. A captain should be with them at such a time, preparing their souls for whatever ordeal they were to face. Sheherz told himself he would rush to join them as soon as the ship was down. The battle-brothers of the Sixth would take heart that he had descended from the distant bridge to pound through the mud with them.

‘Your duty is there, captain,’ said Amhrad. ‘The *Tempestus* needs guidance as much as your brothers. Lead her well.’

‘For glory, my lord.’

‘For glory, Master of the Fleet.’

Reactor nine was shut down but fires were burning right up the spine of the ship. Damage control teams were tied up keeping them from spreading. The *Tempestus* accelerated towards the World Engine trailing wreckage and burning plasma fuel.

‘We’re within the target’s gravity horizon,’ said the shipmistress. ‘Your orders?’

‘All stop,’ said Sheherz. The ship didn’t need its own power any more – the gravity of the World Engine would propel it fast enough. The engine drone lowered to a whisper and the ship was suddenly abnormally quiet.

Men who were born on a spaceship could be driven mad when they set foot on a planet and were suddenly without the engine noise they had heard their whole lives. They thought they had died. Sometimes their hearts stopped and they really did die.

‘Reactors four and eleven are failing,’ said damage control.

Sheherz ran the calculations in his head.

'We won't have enough power for the landing,' said Shipmistress Gereltus. Sheherz had come to the same conclusion himself a moment earlier.

'Then it will be rough,' replied Sheherz. If there was any question of turning back, Gereltus did not voice it. 'All reverse thrust. Brace for collision.'

Klaxons sounded through the ship. New engine notes rose as the prow thrusters burned again, slowing the ship down. It would not be enough for even a crash landing. The *Tempestus* was tough, but even she might not be that tough.

'There is nothing more now that I can do,' said Sheherz quietly. The shipmistress and her crew could not hear him. 'Chance alone will decide. I pray I have stacked our odds high enough, but the outcome is out of my hands.'

He paused. Perhaps a reply could come through the engines and the chiming of the bridge cogitators, or formed from the static on the vox-net. He did not hear it.

'If there is anything you can do, *Tempestus*,' he continued, 'if you can still guide us, then the helm is yours. I cannot claim to be your master now when I have put our survival at the whim of fate. And if either of us should not survive, it has been an honour.'

Perhaps the prow thrusters altered pitch a little. Perhaps the alarms going on every deck hit a higher or lower note for a moment. But Sheherz could not make out any reply from the *Tempestus*.

He did not even know if the machine-spirit was aware, in the way that a human mind was. Perhaps it was just a set of commands to be fired off when the sensors received the right information. His words probably meant nothing to it. But they had to be said.

'Atmospheric breach!' said the crewman at the tactical helm.

'All brace! All brace!' ordered Shipmistress Gereltus again.

With insufficient input from the Imperial fighter craft, the viewscreen had switched back to the prow sensors. The image was patchy and stuttering. It was full of the World Engine, its surface cloaked in silvery cloud. The image shook as the *Tempestus* breached the upper reaches of the World Engine's atmosphere. The ship decelerated alarmingly, catastrophically, and a hundred warnings blared out as turrets and other extremities were ripped off by the sudden air resistance. The friction flared in orange tongues of fire around the edges of the prow. Hull plates stripped off, torn like paper.

The bridge crew were thrown around. Sheherz kept his footing as the mag-locks on his boots anchored him to the deck.

The prow sensors died. The last image the viewscreen ever showed was of the clouds streaking by, burned away just enough to reveal a jigsaw of soaring steel below, a world-spanning alien city.

'Thrusters correcting!' gasped Gereltus. She was clinging to the tactical helm. A loose piece of equipment had struck her and blood ran down her face. 'We're... we're coming down ventral-first...'

The *Tempestus* had turned herself so she would crash belly-down instead of spearing into the World Engine prow first. It was the best she could do in the circumstances. She had ratcheted the chances of success a few per cent higher.

Chance. That was all it was.

The din was awful. Hull plates were being torn off to expose the decks beneath, and they were being stripped by the shrieking wind and washed with flame. Sheherz heard a plasma reactor going critical, the boom of its vaporising coolant almost lost in the howl.

There was only room in his mind for one thought.

We must all make sacrifices. Every man's will be different. But they will be made.

Sheherz was willing to die. He had even come to terms with the whole Chapter being lost. But it was hearing the *Tempestus* dying that was the worst. His body could take pain, he could mourn and avenge brothers he lost... but the ship was an icon, a home, a fellow warrior and a relic of a glorious past. Could he sacrifice that willingly? Or would it have to be torn from his hands by fate?

Doubt struck him. Was there something he was not willing to give up, after all?

The ship crunched through the tallest structures. Sheherz could hear the spires puncturing the lower hull and snapping off.

‘Ventral three is compromised!’ came a vox from one of the crew, screaming to be heard over the roar of tearing metal. ‘Pods deploying! Pods...’

The transmission was cut off. Some of the Astral Knights had been sealed in drop pods, in case the landing was such that it was safer for them to be deployed in the ten-man assault pods than to remain sheltered within the ship. There had been room for barely a company’s worth in the pods, and those Astral Knights were now plummeting from the crashing ship to land wherever fate saw fit to scatter them. The vast majority of the brethren would have to weather the landing on the *Tempestus*.

The ship’s thrusters were still firing, arresting her descent. She had slowed enough to make a collision potentially survivable. There was a chance. Not great, but it existed.

‘It has been an honour,’ said Sheherz, and he felt the machine-spirit slipping away from him, sinking into darkness. ‘Goodbye.’

The floor blistered up, tearing the helm cogitators from their housings. A great mass of dark grey steel ripped up through it, the point of an immense metal spear, its engraved surface hurtling past into the ceiling of the bridge and up through the decks above. The bridge of the *Tempestus* was sternward, towards the middle where collision and enemy fire would struggle to reach the command systems. Suddenly its armoured shelter seemed hopelessly fragile. The scale of the ship became apparent through the endless labyrinths of torn metal opened up by the forces of the crash.

The *Tempestus* let out a terrible dying scream of tearing steel. Exploding fuel tanks and ammunition stashes rose like a choir hitting a crescendo. It was the sound of a dying god.

The ship lurched to the side. The bridge was a ruin of twisted metal. The building that had impaled the *Tempestus* through the belly was being torn down by the ship’s weight. Sheherz could do nothing but stand on his island of deck, watching the magnitude of the destruction. The ruin tore through the ship like a knife through muscle and organs, laying open the hundreds of decks, the crew quarters and sick bays, shrines, mess halls, armouries, the brig and the shipmistress’s quarters, the grey expanse of the crew’s drilling-ground and the long dusty labyrinth of maintenance tunnels.

Even the forgotten places, where no man had walked since the ship’s construction, were ripped open and exposed like the raw nerve endings.

But he could not see the steel-clad caverns of the muster decks. They were further aft than the enormous wound in the ship’s belly. There the Astral Knights were weathering the crash, and the destruction had not reached them yet.

There was hope.

The *Tempestus* hit the ground. The lower decks, exposed by the great wound, flattened into crushed strata of steel. Fires burst there, and showers of sparks from severed power conduits. Sheherz watched it unfold as if in slow motion and the enormity of it filled his mind. Crewmen tumbled into the abyss of ruin. Burning fuel poured from conduit breaches like blood from an artery.

The deck beneath Sheherz gave way. He fell into that black canyon, into the mass of burning steel below.

His last thoughts were calm. A great weight had been taken off, for he had allowed fate to take the *Tempestus* from him. He had given the old ship permission to die in the name of victory, as Sheherz himself had accepted long ago. It was not just a Space Marine’s obligation to offer his life to his duty – it was his right, as well, and he had granted that right to the ship.

It was gratitude he felt, sorrowful but accepting.

Then through the burning darkness loomed a shape like a steel skull, stretched and featureless except for deep sockets with green flecks for eyes. Its hunched metallic shape came closer and it aimed a gun of the same grey metal at him, its details obscured by a sudden glare of green energy and an accompanying burst of pain.

But it did not matter. His duty had been done. The sacrifice had been made.
Then Sheherz thought no more.



*His Imperial Majesty's ship Vengeant Aeternam
Varv System*

**Encryption Code Hemlock
Inquisitorial Eyes Only
Scrivened: Lord Inquisitor Quilven Rhaye**

Loyal Medicae Helvetar,

I received your report and was pleased with your progress.

You are to maintain the highest standards of moral hygiene and information security during this autoseance. Pending a full survey of the Safehold Orbital Exclusion Zone, you must be prepared for the presence of a moral threat, whether from further psychic contact or from outside. I expect all biological systems, be they servitors or personnel, to be fully mind-wiped to prevent a leak of information that may be deleterious to the continued function and good name of the Inquisition.

I require particular attention to be paid to confirming the identity of the subject and ascertaining an exact timeline of events leading up to the conclusion of the Battle of Safehold. While this information is to be recorded in full, it must be treated as sacrosanct and Inquisitorial eyes only, and stored in a gene-locked vessel with void collapse failsafe to prevent unauthorised revelation.

In the name of the Holy Ordos of the Emperor,

– Lord Inquisitor Rhaye

Addendum personal:

Take care of yourself in there, Kalliam.

– Quilven



TWO

Techmarine Sarakos

Fear.

Techmarine Sarakos did not understand it. It was more than just a weakness – it was an offence to logic. A mental force that commanded action, or forced the body to be inactive, in complete ignorance of the circumstances. A man could freeze when he should run, or strike out when he should remain still, because a force called fear compelled him to do so. Fear fulfilled all the criteria of insanity.

And yet he saw it now on the faces of the crew who fell past him as the gravity on the muster decks completely failed. They were thrown about, bones crunching, some of them battering against the ranks of the Astral Knights who were anchored by their armour's mag-locks to the deck. The crew flailed madly, though motion was useless and indeed made injury more likely. They cried out as if someone would hear and help them.

Some of them had been killed by fear. They had held on to a bulkhead door or stanchion to steady themselves even though fire and deformation of the chamber made it more prudent for them to let go. They had fled secure hiding places seeking somewhere safer. They had just stood there, frozen by dread.

Insanity.

The stabilisers built into Sarakos's armour engaged and docking clamps crunched into the deck plates underfoot to keep him locked in place. The ship spun around him and the din was appalling. A great section of the deck ahead of him was ripped upwards and several Astral Knights of the Third Company were thrown into the air. The lights failed. One end of the chamber was torn off as the ship's belly was slit open by a structure on the planet below.

Sarakos felt the data being gathered, collected and submitted to his conscious mind by the cogitators built into the back of his brain. Statistics and probabilities were projected onto his retina by the auto-senses built into the armour he had forged himself.

His chances of survival fluctuated with every second. Twenty per cent. Seventy. Forty. He mentally extinguished them. Knowing the odds would make no difference.

An impact hammered up from below and Sarakos was suddenly free, the muster deck tumbling around him. He just had time to register yet more fear on the face of a young crewman as he flailed brokenly past, before his senses were overwhelmed and Sarakos was knocked out.

'To me! My brethren, to me! We have arrived! Now only victory remains!'

The voice was that of Captain Sufutar of the Third Company. Sarakos had mustered between the brethren of the Third and Fourth Companies.

Sarakos opened his eyes and called up a physical damage assessment. He noted numerous contusions and instances of internal bruising, but nothing that compromised immediate efficiency. His armour's systems were functioning well. His power axe, with its blade in the shape of the half-cog symbol of Mars, was still scabbarded on his back.

He was lying in a great canyon of torn wreckage. The *Tempestus* appeared to have come down on its side, with its uppermost hull ripped open to the sky. Fires dotted the twisted metal

sides of the canyon, some of them spurting burning fuel. The ship had broken almost completely in two and it was in the gap between the massive sections of hull that Sarakos had found himself.

The *Tempestus* was dead. Sarakos filed this fact away in a data-medium bank for future review.

'Here,' said an Astral Knight, standing over him and reaching down. Sarakos took the offered hand. Runes on his retina labelled the brother as Adelphas, Fourth Squad, Third Company. 'Captain!' voxed Adelphas. 'Sarakos is here. He's alive.'

'Bring him to the eastward perimeter,' replied Sufutar over the vox-net. 'We're gathering to establish a foothold. Search parties are being recalled.'

'Yes, captain,' said Adelphas. 'Follow me, Techmarine.'

Sarakos was on his feet and picking his way through the wreckage after Adelphas. Other Astral Knights were moving out of the wreckage of the muster hall, some supporting wounded battle-brothers as they clambered up a steep ruined slope towards the open side of the ship.

They passed the body of an Astral Knight impaled on a spike of torn steel. His head hung back and blood ran from the filters of his faceplate. He had died instantly as the steel punctured and severed the organs of his torso. A label rune flickered in red – Brother Fawzat, Ninth Squad, Third Company.

This fragment of information was ushered back into a databank.

The skyline of the World Engine poked over the rampart of wreckage. Spires and minarets reached towards the streaky grey sky. Sculptures of stylised metal crowned towers whose summits vanished among the clouds.

The air was heavy with power. It felt thick and greasy. Sarakos's auto-senses checked off a breathable atmosphere and Terran-approximate gravity.

Captain Sufutar stood on the ridge ahead with a band of other Astral Knights of the Third and Fourth Companies. 'Tech-Brother Sarakos!' he exclaimed as Sarakos clambered up onto the ridge beside him. 'I am glad to see you. We must push on soon and secure this landing site. Half the Chapter is most of a ship's length away and are already reporting contacts. Amhrad is organising a regrouping prior to a breakout. We must get off this ship soon, enemies are closing in.'

'What are our losses?' said Sarakos.

'The Fourth took the worst of it,' said Sufutar. 'Captain Mohari is dead. The survivors of the Fourth must join with who they can. We will need you with us, Sarakos. You're half machine, you can weather what your brethren cannot.'

'We must form an armoured spearhead to break out,' said Sarakos. 'Who is in command of our armour? I would ride with them.'

Sufutar shook his head. 'The vehicle hangars were destroyed,' he said. 'I saw what is left of them. They were crushed flat. Our Rhinos and Land Raiders will not carry us out of this hole. We will have to walk.'

'And Ancients Keldohran and Vhortaas?' One of Sarakos's duties in the Astral Knights was to maintain the Chapter's Dreadnoughts, the crippled warriors entombed in their walking war machines. Sarakos had seen them docked into their places in the vehicle hangar alongside the Rhinos and the formidable Land Raider assault tanks.

'Gone,' said Sufutar. In that one word was encompassed the loss of centuries of battle-lore and Dreadnought technology that could not be replicated.

Sufutar filed this away, too, and silently deleted the names of Keldohran and Vhortaas from the Chapter's order of battle, along with the armoured strength that lay crushed and smouldering in the wreck behind him.

'Then what are your orders?'

'Advance and take ground,' said Sufutar. 'Find a strongpoint and hold it. We head into that.'

Sufutar pointed down the ridge and into the city. Sarakos's auto-senses began to map what he saw, sketching lines of information around the broken buildings through which the *Tempestus* had crashed.

It was a city of palaces and monuments, all rendered in hard polished lines of steel. Elevated walkways and the skeletons of hollow skyscrapers clambered over one another as if trying to reach the lightning-lashed sky. Forests of cables and wiring hung from an immense statue of a humanoid of alien proportions, a mural of inlaid precious metals covered the side of an immense monolith, a deep canyon ran through the city and glittered with millions of winking lights.

It was too much for the mind to take in at once. Sarakos's data centres took over, compartmentalising the input from his senses and filing the various levels of the city away in the tactical reference centre of his datamedium stack. A battle here could ebb and flow infinitely through the palaces and many-levelled streets. He cycled through the features his internal cogitators had assessed.

'There,' said Sarakos. 'That building, with the columns of steel and the gilded pediment sculptures. It looks the most defensible of the structures nearby.'

'Agreed,' said Sufutar. 'The Eighth Company is on our flank and Captain Zahiros is reporting enemy contacts already. We must move.' He switched to the local vox-net. 'Brethren, this is Sufutar. We are advancing. Stay close and stay alert. We are loath to leave you behind, but we cannot remain. Onwards!'

The Astral Knights moved down the slope of wreckage out of the ruin of the *Tempestus*. The length of the ship crunched through a great swathe of the alien city. Towers had fallen and spilled drifts of torn steel into the sunken roadways. One building had been carved nearly in two, the labyrinth of its metallic innards opened up to the air.

The target building had several ways in, but they were narrow and easily defended, and loose fallen wreckage could be pressed into service as makeshift barricades. The first Astral Knights reached the building's threshold and took cover among its steel pillars.

A warning icon flashed at the edge of Sarakos's vision, picking out a flicker of movement that his conscious mind might have missed.

Other Astral Knights saw it too. Sarakos drew his plasma pistol and followed the movement, which had vanished among the shadows of a fallen slab of hull plate. In the swirling smoke and still-falling debris, it was impossible to pick out anything.

'Stand by,' voxed Sarakos.

'Draw in!' ordered Sufutar. 'Guns up, brethren, and remember the Codex!'

Stuttering bursts of green fire ripped from the shadows into the Astral Knights. One Astral Knight next to Sarakos was struck on the shoulder and the layers of his shoulder pad were peeled away – paint, then ceramite, then underweave and flesh, stripped apart rapidly and disintegrated. The battle-brother fell back, clutching his ruined shoulder, then switched his bolter into his good hand to return fire.

'Open fire!' ordered Sufutar. 'Suppress and press on!'

Bolter fire streaked across the ruined street. Sarakos picked out the shapes moving towards the Astral Knights position. They were humanoid, rather taller than a man, hunched and skeletal. The flashes of bolter fire picked out their metallic, hollow construction, the sculpted bars of a ribcage-like torso and the head hanging low between the shoulders. They had faces like an almost featureless steel mask with green eyepieces. Some had a single horizontal slit for a mouth or a vertical slit for a nose. Some had nothing but eyes.

Their guns were transparent, glowing green rods clamped with power cables and firing mechanisms, and projected bursts of diffuse energy through a pair of focusing tines. Where the bolts of power hit they left strange stratified craters, annihilating matter layer by layer.

Sarakos squared his shoulders and aimed. A targeting reticule hovered around the closest enemy. He let the pistol's plasma coil charge and fired a bolt of super-heated energy. It hit the enemy square in the chest, burning through the weapon in its steel hands and boring fat melted holes through its torso.

The Astral Knights were following Sufutar into the colonnaded building. Sarakos went after them, blasting another few plasma shots into the advancing enemy. More of the metallic xenos were advancing from every direction, finding alleyways between the towers to flank the Astral

Knights.

Sarakos crossed the threshold into the building. Energy blasts scoured layers off the pillars around him as he ducked between them.

Inside, the shadows were deep and thin shafts of light fell from above to pick out blank-faced statues of humanoid aliens. They were similar in form to the metallic creatures outside but had been flesh and blood, with fantastic regalia ornamenting hunched, wizened bodies with bony ridged faces and spindly limbs.

'What are they?' asked Captain Sufutar as the Astral Knights pulled wreckage into barricades and set up fire points around the entrances.

Sarakos felt his subconscious automatically access the datastacks in response to the question. Snatches of battle-lore flickered past his mind's eye. *Sanctuary 101. Volisur Quartus. Hypnoth.*

'Necrons,' said Sarakos. 'Tech-constructs. Xenos of uncertain history, origins and motivation.' The information spooled out of his datastacks – conjecture, contradictions and hearsay, with a minimum of fact and research.

'Necrons,' repeated Sufutar. 'I have heard of this xenos. I have never fought them in the flesh.' He allowed himself a grim smile. 'So to speak. And this is one of their worlds. The whole place looks like a monument they built to themselves. They must think themselves gods.'

'Captain!' voxed one of the Astral Knights. 'The structure has levels beneath us. It looks like a tomb.'

'If they have need of a tomb,' said Sufutar, 'then they can die. You know nothing else that might help us, Techmarine?'

'Their weaponry is based on teleporter principles,' said Sufutar, sifting through the battle reports in his datastacks. Contact with the necrons was usually brief and bloody, with the xenos unwilling to be brought to battle. Sometimes an Imperial settlement disturbed a necron force that was apparently dormant on a planet. Sometimes raiding forces appeared to torment isolated human worlds. On the few occasions Imperial forces had clashed with the necrons on a larger scale, more questions were asked than answered. The tech-construct bodies tended to vanish before they could be examined. Interrogation was useless against them. Their leaders, assuming there were any, were well protected behind their legions of steel soldiers. 'The form we encountered makes up the bulk of their forces but there are others. They possess spacefaring and aerial capability.'

'Anything about how to kill them?' said Sufutar.

'Sufficient physical damage,' replied Sarakos.

'They take your sense of humour when you go to Mars?' asked Sufutar. 'Never mind. Astral Knights! Get spotters up on a higher level. Bring our heavy weapons to the fore. They are closing in!'

From the streets and alleyways around the building more necrons were advancing in step. Behind them drifted another form, resembling the upper half of a steel skeleton mounted on a large anti-grav unit that thrummed two metres above the ground. One of its arms was a cannon, like an upscaled version of the guns the warriors carried, and on its face was mounted an array of targeting lenses.

The Astral Knights returned fire. One necron fell only to stand a moment later, sections of its damaged torso sliding like the panels of a puzzle box to seal its wounds. The flying necron fired its cannon and the middle section of one column vanished, bringing the upper part crashing down around the doorway.

'You! And you!' said Sufutar, picking out two Astral Knights firing from a window. 'Scout behind. Find a position to fall back.' He switched vox-frequencies and Sarakos could only hear one half of the conversation. 'Lord Amhrad, we're in danger of being pinned down here. If we're trapped we cannot regroup.'

Across the street, the side of a building fell in. Chunks of steel crashed down and a cloud of dust rose from the stone foundations. A huge dark shape emerged from the building, shaped something like an immense metal beetle with six appendages writhing and clacking as it

moved. Its head had eight unblinking red lenses for eyes. Its mandibles sparked with electricity as it picked up pieces of debris and wrought them in its mouthparts like a spider weaving prey into its cocoon. It dropped the result to the ground – a miniature version of itself, a flitting metal scarab that scurried around the feet of the warriors marching out alongside it.

One Astral Knight hauled a lascannon into the window beside Sarakos and sighted down it. A burst of las-fire ripped across the street and melted the torso of one warrior into nothing. Sarakos fired from the same window, turning another warrior's right arm into hissing slag.

Scarabs were swarming across the street now, vomited out by the larger spider-construct. One scarab scurried up through the window and leapt onto the face of the Astral Knight manning the lascannon. Sarakos grabbed the scarab even as its mandibles began to carve through the battle-brother's faceplate. It spat bolts of power at him, sizzling past his face and against the wall beside him. Sarakos dashed it against the floor and crushed it underfoot.

Scores of warriors were marching on the Astral Knights position now. Even as some fell before the Space Marines' fire, there were too many of them to hold off.

'Fall back!' ordered Sufutar. 'Back and into the tombs!'

'My thanks, Techmarine,' said the battle-brother who had been attacked by the scarab.

'For what?' asked Sarakos.

The Astral Knights moved rapidly away from the front of the building as green energy blasts stripped away the cover of the pillars and entranceways. Stray bolts tore chunks out of the monumental statues. Beyond the statues was a grand entranceway to a lower level, where the floor sloped downwards flanked by obsidian wall panels with more of what Sarakos assumed was writing in the necron language. It more resembled circuitry diagrams than any human alphabet.

Beneath the alien city was a necropolis. The building that had resembled a temple or basilica was the entrance to a complex of tombs that reached deep below the surface of the World Engine. Each tomb was a massive slab of brushed metal that cast strange reflections in what little light glimmered from the circuitry running around the necropolis pillars. The tombs were inscribed with more alien language, and pictograms of aliens conquering, crushing, dying and being raised to a higher state. Sarakos's bionic left eye blink-captured pics of dozens of them as he passed whole dynasties of tombs, each one with a different figure inscribed on its lid, each one held within the lattice of steel that filled the interior of the necropolis.

Scarabs pursued them. In the darkness they scuttled from pillar to tomb, leaping onto the Astral Knights and trying to pare away the layers of their armour with cutting-tool mandibles. The Astral Knights fought back but they were slowed as they threw the scarabs off into the darkness, stamped them beneath their feet or shot them as they lept.

'The warriors aren't following,' came a vox from the rearmost Astral Knights. 'They're holding the stairway but they're not coming down.'

'Perhaps this is sacred ground,' voxed Captain Sufutar from up ahead.

'Or,' replied Sarakos, 'they know there is no need to pursue us. If we are trapped, or if there is something waiting for us down here, their guns may be redundant.'

'I appreciate your positive outlook, Techmarine,' voxed Sufutar.

Sarakos had not had much cause to interact with Sufutar until fate threw them together on the World Engine. Sarakos had come to understand what sarcasm was after several explanations, but he still did not understand why a Space Marine of Sufutar's rank would spend useful mental capacity on employing it.

The Astral Knights came to a crossroads in the necropolis. Enormous statues loomed up through the darkness, bowing down as if to glower at the Space Marines gathering there.

'Make a stand here,' said Sufutar. 'Amhrad is coordinating us by vox. Other units have made it into the same necropolis, though some way across it. Scout squads are exploring it and our immediate objective is to link up with them. Some units are out of contact. We don't know how many made it off the *Tempestus* but enough of us made landfall to bring down this weapon. And, my brothers, we will.'

'Squad Kelphanar, establish a perimeter. We need eyes on what surrounds us. Techmarine

Sarakos, you say the necrons are tech-constructs. This whole planet looks like a single machine. Find out if you can access data about our surroundings. The whole Chapter might be on this planet but they are split up and we may have to fight alone before we fight as one.'

Sergeant Kelphanar took his squad, which had survived the crash at full strength, out to explore the tombs nearby. Sarakos noted the squad included Brother Adelphas. The rest of the Astral Knights took up firing positions around the crossroads, setting up the few heavy weapons they had and dividing up their bolters between firing zones.

Sufutar was right. The World Engine was an enormous machine. The structures echoed the materials and proportions of which the necron warriors themselves were made. The possibility that the whole World Engine was an artificial construct, rather than a natural planet outfitted with a world-killing weapon and the means to travel through the void, had been floated among the officers of the Varv Deliverance Mission. Speculation on who or what might have made it had been quickly silenced. Imagining that scale of evil kept the mind from focusing on the immediate danger of the World Engine itself.

Could the necrons have built this world? There was little enough known about them. The few Ordo Xenos files Sarakos possessed painted only an approximate picture of their capabilities on the battlefield. Their culture and history, and the forces that motivated their clashes with the Imperium, were unknown.

Sarakos went to examine the closest tomb. It was a rectangular slab of brushed metal several metres on each side, deeply inscribed with necron hieroglyphs. The incised channels glimmered with faint bluish pulses of energy. On the sarcophagus lid was carved the image of a creature rather like the statues that had stood in the entrance building, carrying a sceptre and wearing an elaborate crown. An aristocrat, perhaps, a member of a ruling class the Imperium had not encountered. It was certainly far more ornate than the plain, functional warriors the Astral Knights had fought so far.

Sarakos ran a hand over the sarcophagus lid. He could find no seams in the metal that might indicate a way in. The inductor coils built into his servo-harness detected faint shimmers of energy passing through the sarcophagus, perhaps circuits carrying information. There was no external way into the sarcophagus, but it was certainly not empty.

Sarakos's servo-harness fitted over the backpack of his armour and housed the many tools a Techmarine might need in the field. Its servo-limb could, with the stabilising clamps built into his armour's greaves, lift the side of a tank off the ground to allow repairs to its tracks. The flexible mehadendrite was not as strong but was capable of intricate repairs. Both were controlled by the mind-impulse unit built into the collar of Sarakos's armour, and reacted to his thoughts.

He unfolded the servo-arm. Its articulated length ended in a multi-tool that could be cycled through various tips. Sarakos selected a plasma cutter that employed a blade of white-hot energy.

'Brothers, stand clear,' said Sarakos, and plunged the plasma cutter's blade into the sarcophagus.

The cutter sliced a deep furrow in the metal. Sarakos's environmental detectors analysed elements in the vaporised metal that his databanks could not identify. He carved a square slice out of the sarcophagus and once the final cut was made, extended his mehadendrite to slide the slice out and examine it.

Movement glittered in the darkness. Sarakos drew his plasma pistol and raised the plasma blade for use as a weapon. A host of tiny machines scurried across the surface of the sarcophagus – they resembled the scarabs the necrons had employed in the fighting above, but smaller and without the weaponised mandibles. As Sarakos watched they swarmed around the damaged portion of the sarcophagus and began to weave a web of metallic fibres over the missing section.

The necrons had some capacity to self-repair, poorly understood by Imperial scholars and known only from battlefield anecdotes. It seemed the structure of the World Engine had the same ability to know when it was damaged and deploy machines to repair itself.

Sarakos streamed a vid-capture of the repair scarabs at work into his databanks. In the event

he made it off the World Engine alive, it would provide valuable intelligence to the Ordo Xenos on necron technology.

Sarakos picked up one of the scarabs to examine it more closely. His bionic eye switched to a microscope lens. The metallic insect squirmed in his grasp, six legs wiggling. Either the scarab was governed by a set of programmed behaviour, or it was controlled by a central system that detected damage and deployed scarab swarms accordingly.

Perhaps the World Engine was in control of such machines. Perhaps it had a brain.

Sarakos did not notice another scarab dropping to the floor and scurrying up his leg. When he spotted it in the corner of his eye it had reached the information ports set into the collar of his armour. The ports allowed him to interface his sensory augmentations with machinery to diagnose and repair it. He reached up to pull the scarab free but it had already extruded a proboscis, like a steel needle, to access the interface.

More scarabs leapt off the tomb onto Sarakos. He threw away the one he had been examining and tore more off himself, throwing them down and stamping them to metal filings. But they had forced their way into the interfaces.

It was not a voice that came to Sarakos then. It was not even a message dictated in machine code. It was more like a sudden rush of something utterly unfamiliar, an alien form of thought that forced his mind into a strange new configuration.

He had felt something like it before. Long before, when he had not been Techmarine Sarakos but Elnah Sarakos Ban Deshurrah, son of Elnah Deshurrah Ban Velgahar, a son of the noble houses of Obsidia. He had been young and strong, a fine duellist, a brilliant scholar, the pride of his ancient family and a candidate for elevation to the ranks of the Astral Knights...

Before he had become a Space Marine. Before Mars. Before he had been given so many enhancements to his body and mind, and had almost as much taken away...

He felt a detached sense of revulsion as he realised he was being made to feel emotion again, for the first time in decades.

The discipline of a Space Marine and the augmentations implanted during his Martian pilgrimage allowed him to compartmentalise his mind in the event of mental threats. He separated the part of himself, the human side that had the most in common with the son of House Elnah, that was being inundated with emotions. A rarely accessed set of data described human emotions in case he had to evaluate them, a difficult task without reference since he did not feel them anymore. He cross-referenced the data with what the quarantined mind was feeling, turning the scientific method of the tech-priests of Mars towards his own brain.

There was desperation there, a pain and dismay that suggested ongoing torment and a yearning for cessation and release. It was a powerful negative thought-mass that, in an undisciplined mind, could lead to dangerously wayward or self-destructive actions. Another note was less grim. This was one of hope, not that the despair would vanish, but that there was an ally who could help lift it.

It was the contact with Sarakos that had engendered this hope. It was hope of an ally. The contact had been deliberate, to inform Sarakos of the misery and offer an alliance to fight it.

Which begged the question, what was trying to communicate with him?

As Sarakos turned the majority of his perception inwards, externally he was tearing the scarabs off himself, crushing them or dashing them to shards against the sarcophagus. He ripped the last of them free from his interface ports and the alien emotion drained away instantly.

Sarakos monitored the quarantined section of his mind. There was no sign of infection or moral threat. Nevertheless, he would have to watch it carefully.

On the lid of the sarcophagus the scarabs had stopped their repair work, leaving it half finished. Instead they formed a shape that resembled one of the glyphs that Sarakos had assumed formed the necron language. Whatever had communicated with him was trying to do so visually as well, this one symbol encompassing the mix of emotions they had forced into his mind.

Help.

It was the closest single concept to the cacophony the scarabs had dumped into Sarakos's

brain. Perhaps that was what the symbol meant, too. *Help.*

Sarakos filed that information away too. A translation of the necron glyph-language would be valuable intelligence.

‘These tombs go on forever,’ came a vox from Sergeant Kelphanar. ‘They keep going down, too. This planet is one damned necropolis.’

‘Any visual on the other Astral Knights?’ asked Captain Sufutar.

‘Not yet. Wait... movement. Brothers, there’s something else down here. They’re between us and you, approaching your position. It’s not... they’re not ours.’

‘Necrons?’ voxed Sufutar.

‘Don’t think so, captain. They look like...’

‘Movement!’ came a cry from one of the Astral Knights at the crossroads. The battle-brother was manning a heavy bolter set up on one of the sarcophagi.

‘Open fire!’ ordered Sufutar. The heavy bolter stuttered and the crossroads was lit by the strobe of muzzle flash.

Bolters hammered into the darkness. Sarakos caught a glimpse of pallid flesh and skinny limbs leaping through the shadows, fleeing from the sudden storm of gunfire into the guts of the necropolis.

‘Velishin! Zekrah! Pursue them!’ ordered Sufutar. ‘Brethren, hold to me!’

The two squads from Third Company broke cover and pursued the fleeing enemy. ‘Sarakos,’ voxed Sufutar. ‘Go with them. Find out what we’re up against.’

Sarakos followed the brothers under Sergeants Velishin and Zekrah through the necropolis. His internal cogitators filled in a vector map of the necropolis as it became more labyrinthine and split into multiple levels. Some tombs were simple inscribed slabs like the one he had examined, others were huge megaliths or had entrances suggesting the complexity of the structures inside. Whatever culture the necrons had, it lionised its dead and set them in dark finery as grand as anything Sarakos had seen above.

‘Blood,’ voxed one of the Astral Knights up ahead. Sarakos saw it too, a smear of crimson across the side of one sarcophagus. It splattered on the ground and then streaked on ahead, as if a bleeding creature had slumped against the sarcophagus, fallen, and been dragged away.

The necrons themselves were tech-constructs, but whatever had waited for the Astral Knights down here was very much alive.

‘Squad Kelphanar on your flank,’ came another vox. ‘Watch your fire, brothers.’

A semicircle of smooth black monoliths stood up ahead. The Astral Knights were spreading out around it, staying out of the open. More bloodstains led across the glowing glyphs carved into the floor.

Sarakos’s targeting microcogitator picked out movement in the dark. Sarakos instinctively raised his plasma pistol and fired a bolt of energy. The bolt burst against a pale shape in the shadows, blasting charred limbs from a torso turned instantly to ash.

‘Close in!’ ordered Sergeant Kelphanar. The squad closed from one side of the stone circle and bolters hammered, shooting down more shapes as they tried to scurry away.

One of the targets broke and sprinted across the open ground. Bolters shredded it before Sarakos could get a proper look. He logged the last few seconds of data coming into his bionic eye and spooled it back through his datastacks, projecting the recording onto his retina slowed down several times.

The shape was mostly unclothed save for a loincloth of segmented golden metal, inset with a glyph of red and turquoise lacquer. The instant before the bolter shells ripped into it, Sarakos could see what it had been.

It was human. Shaven-headed and covered in angular scars, with the same glyph it wore cut into the top of its right arm like a brand of ownership. But definitely human.

Sarakos fired again, this time the plasma bolt boring through the lower back of another human running from Squad Kelphanar’s assault. Another tried to run past Sarakos – Sarakos’s servo-arm lashed out and caught the runner in the throat. Sarakos saw the man’s physique, while lean, was muscular, well-worked and fit. He had a heavy steel collar around his neck. The skin

of the neck and shoulders was scarred where the collar had rubbed.

The servo-arm extended a spike that punched through the man's temple and through his brain.

'They're human!' voxed a familiar voice – Brother Adelphas of the Third Company, who had pulled Sarakos from the wreckage. 'They have humans down here!'

'They're cornered,' voxed Sergeant Zekrah. 'They're not armed. Hold fire?'

'Hold fire,' agreed Kelphanar. 'Hold fire, brothers! But keep your wits!'

Brother Adelphas ran across the stone circle to Sarakos. 'You saw,' he said. 'You knew they were human. You killed him anyway.'

Sarakos glanced down at the man who had been despatched by his servo-arm. It had barely required a thought, just a reflex action that needed the slightest moment of confirmation from Sarakos's conscious mind.

'We are to assume aggression from all contacts in a battle zone of which the parameters are unknown,' said Sarakos. 'As the Codex requires.'

'Emperor's teeth,' swore Adelphas. 'Did they cut all the human out of you on Mars?'

The three squads closed in slowly, herding the surviving humans into the stone circle. In the open they all had the same lean, strong look, the same scars of ownership and the same metal collars. Most were men, a couple were women.

Sergeant Kelphanar advanced on one of the humans, bolt pistol still levelled at the man's chest. 'Who are you?' he demanded. 'Why are you here?'

The man did not reply. His eyes seemed unable to focus. His body twitched and his muscles spasmed faintly as if an electric current was being run through him.

'They don't speak Gothic,' said Adelphas.

'They don't speak at all,' said Kelphanar. 'Techmarine, what are the collars they wear?'

Sarakos approached the human and extended his mechadendrite. Its sensors reported low-level electrical activity. Sarakos activated the small cutting blade on the mechadendrite and sawed through the point where the two halves of the collar met – it was held by a locking mechanism that did not look like it was ever meant to be opened.

The man did not resist. His eyes rolled back and his mouth lolled as if his nervous system was being overwhelmed. The collar split and both halves clunked to the floor.

The man sank to his knees. He drew in a rattling, painful breath as if it was the first time he had ever done so. His hands went to his throat, which was dark with rings of old scar tissue. His eyes were in focus now, and his movements were his own.

'What are you?' he gasped in Low Gothic. His voice was hoarse.

'I asked you first,' said Kelphanar, still aiming his pistol at the man.

'Levitanus,' came the reply. 'Selphin... Selphin Minoris. They came and killed the missionary, and took us all onto their ships... and then... we were slaves. Our minds were not our own. I was watching myself working down here, but it was someone else controlling me... controlling all of us.'

'Selphin Minoris,' repeated Kelphanar. 'Techmarine?'

Sarakos's subroutines rifled through his datastacks. 'Frontier world just past the sector border,' he said. 'Depopulated six years ago. Xenos or renegades speculated responsible.'

'The necrons take slaves,' said Adelphas.

'We need to get them back to Sufutar,' said Kelphanar. 'We need to learn whatever they can tell us about this place. And Amhrad has to know.'

'I will answer your questions,' said the slave who had called himself Levitanus. 'But answer one of mine. What are you?'

'Space Marines of the Astral Knights Chapter,' replied Sarakos.

Levitanus smiled weakly. 'I never thought I would see one with my own eyes...'

The Astral Knights led the slaves back to the crossroads and Sufutar's position. Sarakos continued to remove the collars, and each slave in turn was jolted painfully back to reality as whatever control the necrons had over them was severed.

A strange sensation glimmered within Sarakos. It was an echo of the emotions forced into his

mind earlier. Perhaps part of him had been left vulnerable. It was a rumination on something Adelphas had said, and the words ran around and around Sarakos's mind.

Did they cut all the human out of you on Mars?

Memories were accessed, although Sarakos had not consciously requested them. They were from so long ago their recollection was grainy and incomplete. They were not the memories of Techmarine Sarakos at all, but of Elnah Sarakos Ban Deshurrah. They were first formed in the grand hall of House Elnah's summer residence in Port Exalt, the capital of Obsidia, overlooked by the magnificent stone fortress of the Astral Knights.

Two of those Astral Knights had come to House Elnah that day. One was a Chaplain in the skull helm of the Chapter Reclusiam, and the other wore armour painted in dark red instead of the Astral Knights white and blue. House Elnah had known for some time their son was a potential recruit to the Chapter, outstanding among the thousands of noble sons who hoped to ascend to the ranks of the Space Marines. His elders had regarded the visit with some fear, for it was rare for the Astral Knights to take a particular interest in a single recruit this early in the duelling season. Was Sarakos Ban Deshurrah to undergo an examination looking for some suspected taint or failing? Was there something wrong with him, or the family itself?

Sarakos had stood in the grand hall alone, for the Astral Knights had insisted no family members be present. Sarakos refused to be cowed by the armoured giants who examined him through the eyepieces of their faceplates. The one in red circled him as if he was a thoroughbred being auctioned.

'You killed Lokinsae Farza Ban Farzala,' said the Chaplain. Sarakos did not know the Chaplain's name. There had been no introductions.

'I did,' said Sarakos. 'But the Lord Examiner judged the duel to be right and proper, and the killing blow a necessary act. It was witnessed by many.'

'We had been watching Farza,' continued the Chaplain.

'Then you wasted your time,' said Sarakos.

'I have judged you a potential recruit,' said the Chaplain. 'And my brother Techmarine has examined the statements gathered about you. It is possible you could join his order within the Astral Knights. Possible, I stress. Not certain. Not even likely.'

Sarakos did not know what a Techmarine was. The Astral Knights kept the workings of their Chapter secret from the majority of Obsidia's population, and the house elders who ruled the planet helped keep those secrets.

'You have a brain in that skull,' said the Astral Knight in red armour, who Sarakos assumed was the Techmarine. 'Every Space Marine must. But yours is keener than most. Were it not for your high birth, you would have been apprenticed to the forge brethren in the Sprawl.'

Sarakos felt a sense of disgust. The forge brethren of Obsidia learned their tech-lore from the Techmarines of the Astral Knights but went on to serve among the commoners. They maintained the power and manufactory systems of the lower cities. No son of a noble house would dream of sinking to such menial levels.

'But,' continued the Techmarine, 'we also have need of such skills. If you prove yourself during the duelling season, and if you can show yourself to have the potential for learning that has been suggested of you, you could join us. We ask if you would take that step.'

Sarakos was taken aback. Every boy on Obsidia dreamed of joining the Astral Knights. Even the children of the sub-enfranchised classes told fanciful tales of being raised somehow to aristocracy so they could be chosen. There was never any question of being asked, because there was never any question of refusing.

'Of course I would,' said Sarakos. 'I would gladly abandon my house and my planet to serve as an Astral Knight.'

'So you have been taught to say since the day you could speak,' said the Techmarine. 'But I am not just an Astral Knight. And the sacrifices we make to serve as a Techmarine are not just of your family and planet. They cannot be demanded of anyone, for he who is forced to make them is denied the honour such sacrifice wins.'

‘What will I give up?’ asked Sarakos.

The Techmarine removed his helmet. Beneath the faceplate his face was pocked and old, the skin as grey as a corpse’s. The flesh of his throat and lower jaw had been pared away and replaced with mechanical prosthetics. One eye was also gone and a bionic sat in the surgically scarred socket. The hairless scalp was punctured with data ports. ‘Everything,’ said the Techmarine, ‘that makes you human.’

Sarakos had never seen the face of a Space Marine. They were supposed to be handsome. This one was ugly. He had never seen anyone so ugly, not even among the diseased and malnourished who lived outside Obsidia’s stratified society. The battles this Astral Knight had fought were written across his face.

‘Our order,’ continued the Techmarine, ‘maintains the wargear of our Chapter and sees to the technological needs of battle. It is an arduous burden we carry. The tech-lore that we must learn is too great to fit into an unaugmented mind. To make room, we must lose some of what we do not need. We do not need our capacity to feel misery or joy. We do not need the affection we hold for our families or the disdain we feel for the weak. You will be taken on a pilgrimage to Mars where you will receive the augmentations of a Techmarine, and where those useless parts of you are cut out. You will leave your humanity behind. We cannot demand this of you. It can only be offered willingly. Accept it and should you continue to make yourself noteworthy and survive your training, you will journey to Mars and return a Techmarine. That is why we have come to you today, son of Deshurrah, to offer you the chance to make this sacrifice.’

‘And if I refuse?’ asked Sarakos.

‘A Space Marine’s life is one of sacrifice,’ said the Chaplain. ‘If you will not make this one, we shall bear you no ill will. But you will not be an Astral Knight.’

Sarakos had not spoken for a long time. He had looked about the grand hall, which was covered in the proud emblems of House Elnah. The mosaic of a ship, the principal symbol of the house, covered one wall. It was the ship that had carried Lord Elnah, the house’s founder, to the site of the future city of Eln’shah that the house had ruled for generations. The tales of those times, and of the naval aristocracies that followed, had filled Sarakos with pride. He had imagined himself fighting from the deck of Lord Elnah’s ship as he trained with the house duelling masters.

That pride would be gone. He would never feel it again.

His love for his sisters, for whose honour he had already duelled and killed seven men, would be gone. His respect for his father and mother. His admiration of his uncle, the general who marshalled the armies of Obsidia against the savage natives of the southern pole. All gone.

And he would not be an Elnah any longer. He would return from the Martian pilgrimage a mutilated and scarred creature like the Techmarine. His sisters would run from him in fear if they saw him. His mother would swoon in shock. He would no longer be recognised as a son of House Elnah, either from within or without.

But he would be an Astral Knight.

‘I will make any sacrifice for my planet, for my Emperor, and for my species,’ said Sarakos.

‘So you have been taught to say,’ said the Chaplain.

‘And if I was given the chance to make that sacrifice, and did not, I would not be worthy of my house. I would rather lose everything that makes me a son of Elnah, than live on as a disgrace to that name. Lead me to Mars and take my humanity, Techmarine. That is my answer.’

The Astral Knights had not replied. They simply left. And when his family had entered the hall and asked him what had happened, he had not been able to answer them such were the tears that threatened to fall from his eyes.

Did they cut all the human out of you on Mars?

The answer was yes.

‘They call this world Borsis,’ said Levitanus. ‘The lords try to keep their dealings from us, but they could not make us completely ignorant. We humans are curious creatures.’

The slaves had been gathered at the crossroads as Sarakos continued to remove the control

collars. Two of the slaves had simply dropped dead, such was the shock of having control over their bodies again. Most had lived and were lucid enough to provide intelligence. Sufutar was interrogating them and Levitanus was proving to be the most useful. Before his capture by the necrons he had been a leader of his colony and he had sought to learn as much as he could about the enemy who had captured him, as a good Emperor-fearing citizen should. He had already provided information about the other slaves – thousands of them were on Borsis, conducting maintenance that was too dangerous or menial for the necrons themselves.

‘Who leads them?’ asked Sufutar.

‘They have their aristocracies,’ said Levitanus. ‘Powerful dynasties. I know not how machines can have a dynasty but that is how they think of themselves. Their leader is named Heqiroth, of the Nephrekh dynasty. He usurped the last ruler, Turakhin. There are other dynasties, some loyal, some not. The necrons wished us to remain ignorant of their conflicts but they could not hide them from us entirely. This game of power is all their leaders care about. The warriors are unfeeling machines, it seems, but their leaders have desires and plots of their own. I wish I could tell you more, Space Marine.’

‘As do I,’ said Sufutar.

‘Many of my people are on this world,’ said Levitanus. ‘They will look to me for answers, and I have none to give them. May I ask when we are to leave Borsis?’

‘We will not,’ said Sufutar.

Levitanus was quiet after that. He looked down at the floor, and a hand went unconsciously to the deep layer of scar tissue around his neck.

Sarakos accessed the command vox-channel. It was fragmented and obscured by static, for many of the Astral Knights were far below the surface of Borsis and the structures and power outputs were interfering with the signals. But there was enough to remain in communication, if only sporadically.

‘I hear you, Techmarine,’ came Chapter Master Amhrad’s voice in response to Sarakos’s vox-hail.

‘Lord Amhrad,’ said Sarakos. ‘We now possess critical intelligence on the necrons. They have a weakness.’

Levitanus had begun to weep. For a moment Sarakos wondered why, before he focused his mind on more relevant matters.



*Orbital Supply Station Madrigal 12
High Polar Orbit, Safehold
Varv System*

**Encryption Code Penance
Inquisitorial Eyes Only. Ref. Lord Inquisitor Quilven Rhaye
Scrivened: Medicae Obscurum Kalliam Helvetar**

Psychological impact resulting from the previous contact caused this functionary to replace further contact attempts with mental purification rites. These were prepared for and enacted with the assistance of servitor-orderlies and required seventy-two hours of fasting. As a result the scheduling of the autoseance programme was significantly revised.

Emotive dampening had proven insufficient given the intensity of contacts involving both the death of one perceived subject and the psychological resonance of the experiences of another. When the purification rites were complete this functionary elected to retreat to the orbital station's chapel for prayer and reflection.

She prayed to the Emperor Most High in His aspect as Shield and Deliverer from Corruption, that her soul might withstand the assaults made upon it. She reflected that through fear, and through the abandonment of one's duty caused by fear, the Great Enemy might enter the unguarded mind. This was followed with mortification of the flesh, and a subsequent synskin graft to this functionary's upper back and left thigh.

The communication from Lord Inquisitor Rhaye was received in good order and decrypted with the use of the Inquisitorial rosette. Its instructions were carefully noted before the communication was data-shredded in accordance with information hygiene procedure.

The autoseance recommenced. The subject body was drained of the preservative infusion used to store it during periods of inaction and the psychoconductive coil, semantic cogitator and holomat servitor reconnected. Tech-rites were enacted to please the machine-spirits of these devices. Protective measures were employed as before prior to contact being attempted.

This functionary again received fragmentary sensory input upon initial contact.

The rings of Obsidia drifting across the sky, marking out the dark band before which the game beasts fled. And so the horns sound and the hunt gallops in pursuit, the most blessed sons of this world with bow and spear echoing the panoply and skill of their forebears...

The steel city hurtling by below, the cogitator's runes dancing between thousands of targets as the ship weaves between the spires. Alarms sound as hostile weapons systems home in and the shriek of unfamiliar engines tears through the air...

A terrible sadness, like an endless cry of abandonment, forced directly into the mind with the force of an invading army. It is as sudden and painful as the impact of a bullet. It fills the mind completely, a river of misery obliterating the rest of the senses, and a scream rising that forms a single word: Help.

Half a jaw still opens and closes, though too little is left of the throat and tongue to form words. Half an eyeball rolls bloodily in half a socket. So much has been stripped away he cannot survive, but too much remains to let him die quickly. The battle rages. He cannot be saved. A hand grabs the fallen brother's wrist and drags him on, more as a gesture than in any hope of saving him...

This functionary remained partially conscious during the administering of cardiac and brainwave stabilisers. Shortly after life signs returned to within acceptable parameters, acquisition of contiguous sensory relay was again achieved.



THREE

Brother Ghazin

‘The battle turns,’ said Chapter Master Amhrad. ‘Not to victory, not yet. But now we can begin to fight it.’ Amhrad had led a portion of the Astral Knights to a building that was most likely a palace belonging to a necron dynasty now ill-favoured. Its finery was blotched with corrosion. The inlaid patterns on the walls had begun to peel and rust away. The mosaic of coloured alloys on the floor came apart under the boots of the Space Marines. It had a throne room, with a massive seat built from blocks of gold and iron and dozens of smaller seats for councillors or courtiers. One wall was cut into an enormous mask with three eyes above a hollow mouth.

Brother Ghazin flicked through the communications log stored in the auspex scanner he carried. ‘Sufutar and the Third, what remains of the Fourth and individual units from across the Chapter are in the necropolis,’ said Ghazin. On his slate he had pieced together the reports from the various officers to work out where their greatest concentrations lay. ‘Zahiros and the Eighth, Pelisaar and the Second, and the gunship *Damoclean* are holding an apparent residential region. They are suffering intermittent attacks but they are holding well and they report a large body of human slaves at a prison building nearby. Khabyar’s Ninth and the surviving elements of the Sixth under First Sergeant Kypsalah are fighting a running battle through the city. They have yet to secure a defensible position.’

‘And we have the Seventh Company and the gunship *Maxentius*,’ said Amhrad. He stared down at the floor for a moment in thought. ‘My thanks, Brother Ghazin. This I can work with. What do you think of it?’

‘Me?’ asked Ghazin, looking up from his data-slate.

‘I need every opinion I can get,’ said Amhrad. ‘Librarian Hyalhi will offer me his counsel, as will the captains. But a battle-brother without high rank will not, so I must ask it. You are a member of Hyalhi’s honour guard, are you not? He would not have chosen you if you did not have a brain in your head.’

Ghazin had never spoken with Chapter Master Amhrad except for the times required by ritual. Hyalhi had chosen Ghazin to prepare and present the intelligence on the Chapter’s situation, and Ghazin suspected it was one of the Chief Librarian’s tests. This was probably another.

‘We have lost most of the Fourth and Sixth Companies,’ said Ghazin. ‘In any other battle, that would be a tragedy to be met with weeks of mourning and a thousand oaths of revenge.’

‘But this is not any other battle.’

‘No, my lord.’

‘Do you mourn them, brother?’

‘Not yet,’ said Ghazin. ‘When Borsis has fallen, I shall honour their memories. But I am angry now.’

‘Good. And what would you do next?’

‘I would not presume to...’

‘You will presume,’ said the Chapter Master. ‘I know what my captains will tell me, for I hear it hourly. But I do not hear what every battle-brother would tell me, so it is a perspective I do not receive often enough.’

Ghazin swallowed. He had never known fear on the battlefield, for a Space Marine was

created to ignore that fear, master it and set it aside. But what he felt then, a tightness in his belly and an urge to flee scrabbling in the back of his mind, was perhaps something like the fear that normal men felt when the bullets began to fly.

‘We know nothing of this world,’ said Ghazin. ‘We only just learned its name. We cannot strike yet, for there is nothing to strike at. But two of our gunships survived the crash and can help find out more.’

‘Many brothers,’ said Amhrad, ‘would simply have said they would do whatever I decided. Some would have said to show caution, some would have said attack with reckless fury. I can see now why Hyalhi chose you for his honour guard.’

Ghazin saw the comms-rune flickering against his retina. He opened up his squad’s vox-channel.

‘Gather in the observatory,’ was the curt vox-burst he received.

‘The Chief Librarian requests me,’ said Ghazin.

‘Then go to him, brother,’ said Amhrad.

Ghazin left the throne room, unable to quell his sense of relief.

The Astral Knights had dubbed one tower of the palace the ‘observatory’ because of its domed roof and the patterns of gemstones that resembled alien constellations on the walls. Ghazin stepped over the tiny scarab-like robots on their way to repair the damage done to the front of the palace when the Astral Knights had taken it. Borsis seemed willing to let the palace decay, but not to fall.

Chief Librarian Hyalhi was there with the other eight brothers of his honour guard, all marked out with the horned skull symbol of the Chapter’s Librarium on one knee pad. Hyalhi himself wore armour in dark blue instead of the Astral Knights’ normal livery, with the collar extended into the aegis hood arching over his head. His face was deep brown-black, oddly scarless for a Space Marine, with sunken eyes and high cheekbones. His forehead bore six long-service studs. He carried a force staff of carved white wood topped with a silver eagle.

‘Brethren,’ said Hyalhi, ‘there can be no rest here.’ His voice was a low rumble that seemed to echo around in his aegis hood. ‘We must keep moving lest the necrons surround us and force us to battles we cannot win. But it is not enough just to run. The Chapter Master has requested that I act on intelligence our brother Techmarine Sarakos has brought from the necropolis beneath the crash site. Borsis is not a natural world, it is a machine, and we must seek out how it is controlled and by whom.’

‘The ruling caste of the necrons, then?’ asked Brother Burhan, whose blunt bullet-shaped head was well scorched from fighting with the squad’s heavy flamer.

‘If so, our task is to find out who they are so our brethren can cut the head off the serpent,’ said Hyalhi. ‘Again, it is upon the chosen brethren that the onerous task has fallen. Do you accept it?’

‘We do,’ said the battle-brothers in unison.

‘Then follow,’ said Hyalhi. ‘We go down.’

No Astral Knight, save perhaps Amhrad alone, could say with complete certainty what psychic powers Hyalhi possessed.

As Chief Librarian of the Astral Knights, his most important role was as advisor to the Chapter Master. But he also had to be a living weapon on the battlefield, a terror of the Emperor’s enemies who wreaked bloodshed with his mind greater than any Space Marine could with bolter or chainsword. Some Librarians fired bolts of psychic power or overwhelmed the senses of their enemies, or enhanced their fellow Space Marines with improved reaction time, strength or resistance to harm. But Hyalhi did not seem to fit any of those moulds.

His honour guard was in a position to see Hyalhi’s powers in action more than most. Ghazin had concluded that Hyalhi possessed a form of short-term precognition, the ability to see the flight of a bullet before it was fired or the arc of a blade before it fell, giving him a half-second advantage in battle that his Space Marine prowess turned into the foundations of victory. But he

had also witnessed strange coincidences that benefited Hyalhi or impeded his enemies. A blast door falling to cut off pursuers during the boarding of the space hulk *Killing Spree*. Explosive booby-traps failing to detonate during the fighting on the jungle world of Mogron. An eldar pirate's cutlass snapping off in the joint of Hyalhi's armour instead of impaling him through the chest. Too many to count.

Sometimes an Astral Knight would forgo the protocols of respect and rank, and outright ask Ghazin what powers Hyalhi possessed. Ghazin always replied that he did not know, which was the truth.

Brother Felhidar joined Ghazin on point as they descended through the levels beneath the palace. Borsis seemed to be machinery all the way down – if it had a rocky core like a natural world, it was far below the layers of necron structures.

If these were dungeons beneath the palace they were for the most exquisite prisoners. Inlaid patterns of coloured metals picked out the images of faces on the walls, all of them similar to those of the necron warriors the Astral Knights had encountered above but with elaborate crowns and regalia. The lower the squad descended the lower the ceilings and the more frequently they came across what looked like shrines – statues of faceless steel beings framed in alcoves, with offerings of precious metal bars laid out in front.

Ghazin wondered what Hyalhi expected to find down here. He knew better than to ask a direct question of the Chief Librarian, because he knew he would be asked three more in return.

'Do you hear that?' asked Felhidar as he and Ghazin crept around yet another corner, bolters aimed in front of them.

'Just,' said Ghazin. A regular metallic sound came from up ahead, the crunch and hiss of machinery. 'Stand by,' he voxed to the rest of the squad. 'We're scouting ahead.'

Ghazin and Felhidar approached the source of the noise, a dark archway in the side of the corridor. The faces on the walls here were eyeless, with horizontal rectangles for mouths and headdresses of golden spheres.

'Think on our brethren fighting the battles topside,' said Felhidar grimly. 'They have enemies to visit our anger upon. We are down here creeping around like thieves.'

'Hyalhi knows what he is doing,' said Ghazin.

Felhidar just grunted in reply. Hyalhi seemed to have selected Felhidar for his honour guard precisely because he viewed everything with such cynicism.

Felhidar backed against the archway. He motioned Ghazin to take up position at the other side. Ghazin darted across the open archway, catching a glimpse of moving machinery and dark metal as he did so. There was no change in the noise, now a rattling din, to suggest anyone had seen him.

Felhidar held up a clenched fist, then brought his hand down sharply. *Go.*

Ghazin rounded the corner into the machine room.

The first thing he saw was a human corpse, naked and skinny, hanging from a hook that rattled along a track built into the ceiling. Thin arms of glistening articulated steel pared the body apart, separating the head and the limbs. The parts were deposited on an elaborate conveyor which took them towards a bank of processing machines at one end of the room, with dozens of insect-like robot appendages to pick up the parts and force them down jaws lined with blades and grinders.

Tiny scarabs scurried across the conveyor as the oozing body parts moved along. Their mandibles peeled off skin and muscle, separating organ and bone into neat piles arranged as precisely as the work of an artist. By the time the body reached the processors it had been broken down into pieces so completely that it did not resemble a person any more, but the components of a puzzle from which a human corpse could be assembled.

Another body was brought in along the ceiling. The processors finished swallowing the first as the second was placed on the conveyor.

The room stretched on. Another processing array stood a few metres down through the darkness, then another. From the sound of it there were many, many more.

A larger machine loomed past the first. This one received the processed corpse matter,

carried by hundreds of scarabs. This machine, like a squat hundred-armed beast of steel, transformed the body parts into blocks of compressed bone or flesh, to be carried off by yet more scarabs to be stacked like so much cargo against the wall of the room.

Everything glistened with blood. It stained the conveyor and the paring blades. The scarabs left trails of tiny blood-dots wherever they scurried. It dribbled from the jaws of the processing machine. It oozed from the stacks of compressed meat and bone.

‘You wanted a focus for your anger, brother,’ said Ghazin.

‘I would burn this whole planet,’ said Felhidar, ‘if I was the only one of us left alive to do it.’

Steel limbs clattered against the ceiling. A shape larger than any of the scarabs rattled just out of sight.

‘Movement!’ voxed Ghazin. ‘We are not alone, brothers!’

Felhidar saw it long enough to aim and fire a burst of bolter rounds. In the muzzle flare Ghazin saw a spidery shape, like a necron warrior but with longer limbs and hung with sheets of bloody skin. The shape of a human face flapped at its side – the skin was human, taken from one of the processed corpses. Instead of carrying a gun this warrior had hands and feet ending in talons as sharp as the processing machines’ paring blades.

Its face was a parody of a skull in metal. Red lenses glinted in the gunfire. Its slit mouth seemed curled into a mocking snarl. Its chest was covered in spikes onto which had been impaled a fresh human cranium and spinal column.

Felhidar’s burst missed and the warrior scuttled along the ceiling behind the large processor.

Ghazin ran into the room and crouched beside the nearest conveyor for cover. Parts of the bloody corpse rattled past his eyes and he forced himself to ignore them. More movement clacked and scurried in the darkness.

The first warrior leapt down, impossibly fast, right at Felhidar. Felhidar squeezed off a few more shots but they flew wide, and the necron was on him. Bladed fingers reached for the seals of his armour and the eye-pieces of his faceplate. Felhidar was on his back, bowled over by the suddenness of the attack.

Ghazin jumped up and ran right at the warrior. A Space Marine was an exceptionally skilled warrior, but his muscular and skeletal augmentations made him massively strong by human standards and sometimes that raw strength was what mattered. Ghazin charged into the necron, hit it square on and slammed it into the wall behind Felhidar.

Flaps of shredded skin clung to Ghazin’s faceplate, obscuring his vision. He went by instinct, ramming an elbow into the necron and feeling metal fracturing. He forced it into the wall as if it were a giant insect he was trying to crush. He fended off the creature’s hand as it reached for his face, and forced his bolter up under the lower edge of its ribcage.

Ghazin fired point-blank up into its body. Pain lanced through his side as the necron thrashed at him and a blade found the gap between chestplate and abdominal armour. A second shot erupted out through the necron’s shoulder and the third blew its head almost completely off.

Mechanical components clattered to the floor. The necron shuddered and let out the sound of fracturing metal. Ghazin pulled his arm free and wrenched its head off with his hand. With something like this, it paid to be sure it was dead.

‘More of them,’ snarled Felhidar. He was firing as he spoke into the carpet of scuttling limbs approaching along the dark chamber’s ceiling. Each necron was draped in human skin and glistening red with fresh blood. Ghazin counted eight, ten, twelve and more.

The rest of Hyalhi’s honour guard reached the archway and ran in, firing as they went.

‘Brother, you are wounded,’ voxed Apothecary Saahr as he ran by. Saahr was the most experienced of the squad, with a score of symbols on his left forearm armour to denote each battle-brother whose life he had saved in combat.

‘It is not bad,’ said Ghazin, a moment before the cold pain caught up with him. The blade had cut deep. He felt the tightness in his chest that came from internal bleeding filling up the space between organs. He tried to run forward into the cover of the conveyor but his legs did not obey and they buckled underneath him.

He put a hand out to catch his fall. He gasped down a breath and felt another flash of pain as

he tried to fill his lungs.

‘Saahr, get him clear!’ ordered Hyalhi as he entered the chamber. ‘Brothers, form up! Do not fight them alone!’

Saahr grabbed Ghazin’s shoulder guard and hauled him back to the archway. Each breath was agony. It felt like the blade was still in there, twisting deeper with every motion.

‘It *is* bad,’ said Saahr. ‘Do not mistake foolishness for valour, Brother Ghazin.’

Saahr began to work on the fastenings holding Ghazin’s breastplate on. Ghazin turned his head to watch as Hyalhi strode into the middle of the battle. Already two necrons had been felled by concentrated bolter fire but others were surrounding the squad and leaping down to strike and scuttle away. Brother Masadh knocked a bladed hand away with the stock of his bolter. Brother Hesheth caught a charging necron by the back of the head and slammed it to the floor. Two more of the squad joined him in shattering its body with volleys of point-blank fire.

But there were more necrons. Too many.

Hyalhi raised his force staff and stood clear of the rest of the squad. ‘Hold fire!’ he demanded. He made of himself a target, too tempting for the necrons to resist as they clambered across the ceiling over the heads of the squad to get at the Librarian.

Three of the necrons jumped down from the ceiling at Hyalhi. Hyalhi planted the end of his force staff into the floor.

Purple-white crackles of power flashed up from the staff’s impact like miniature volleys of lightning. Two of the necrons were blasted to metal shards by the burst. The last one was thrown to the floor and Hyalhi caught it with his free hand as it fell, holding it up by the segmented metal column of its neck as if to examine it. The necron was still hung with human skin, with a fringe of severed hands around its shoulders like a mantle.

‘Horror is not a weapon that works against an Astral Knight,’ said Hyalhi, seemingly ignoring the other necrons scurrying towards him. ‘Let us see this lesson is well taught.’

It was with the absolute minimum of movement that Hyalhi avoided the lashing blades of the necrons that dropped down around him. Every movement, no matter how slight, took him out of the path of a killing blow. A tilt of the head kept him from being decapitated. A half-step backwards took him out of the arc of a slash that could have laid him open from sternum to spine.

Ghazin had seen it before. Hyalhi only used his powers to their fullest when absolutely necessary – the honour guard speculated that he had only a limited well of psychic power to draw from, or that too long channelling them would put his mind at risk. Every time, it was mesmerising.

It took Ghazin’s mind partially off the pain as Saahr opened up the chestplate of his armour. Saahr’s right arm was clad in a medical gauntlet incorporating transfusers, an array of miniaturised medical tools and even a micro-laser for delivering the Emperor’s Mercy to brothers too wounded or physically compromised to live. A circular saw blade extended from Saahr’s palm and he cut a neat slit in the internal breastplate of fused ribs that protected Ghazin’s organs.

The pressure was suddenly relieved. The internal breastplate granted protection to the vital organs but it could also prevent bleeding when it might be desirable. The blood pooling in Ghazin’s chest had somewhere to go and he was able to take in a proper, full breath, the relief of which was far greater than the pain of Saahr’s ministrations.

Hyalhi spun out of the way of several necrons as they tried to disembowel or decapitate him at once. He flicked out his staff, and a burst of purplish lightning showed he was discharging a portion of his psychic power through it into the warrior he struck. The warrior’s metallic skull was split open and circuit-like components, the equivalent of its grey matter, scattered across the floor.

Ghazin instinctively tried to rise to help the Chief Librarian, but Saahr held him down. Ghazin realised he was too weak to resist.

More necrons swarmed at Hyalhi. Hyalhi evaded them with perfect efficiency of movement, but even he could not keep going forever.

Hyalhi dropped to one knee, his head bowed. At his unspoken order the rest of the Astral Knights opened up with a volley of rapid bolter fire just below head height. The storm of fire streaked over Hyalhi and ripped into the necrons.

Hyalhi had made himself an open target and the necrons, so eager to take such an exalted head, had made themselves just as vulnerable in their haste to kill him. They were caught in the open, crowding before the bolters of the Astral Knights, lined up as if for an execution.

Necron skulls were shattered. Arms were blown from shoulders. Necrons staggered, headless, as the last motes of information ran through their motive systems before they clattered to the floor.

Hyalhi still had the necron in his free hand. He held it up and crushed its steel spine in his gauntlet. The lights went out behind the panes of its eyes. 'Advance, brothers,' he ordered.

The necron warriors had lost more than half their number. Many were missing limbs or bleeding sparks from torso wounds. They scurried away as the honour guard followed, snapping fire into them. More necrons fell. One was thrown broken onto the conveyor and chewed up by the processing machine that kept churning away throughout the firefight.

'Still, brother,' said Saahr as he continued working on Ghazin's chest wound. Ghazin felt a line of pain as something was inserted through the incision the Apothecary had made. 'The wound has penetrated your lungs. Both have collapsed. Your multi-lung alone is keeping you breathing. One aorta is severed and your coagulants are not enough to seal it. The bleeding will continue until you can be properly treated. I cannot do that here but I can make you stable and prevent the bleeding from pressuring your organs.'

'I can fight,' said Ghazin.

'No, Brother Ghazin, you cannot,' said Saahr. 'What repairs I have done can be undone too easily. It benefits us nothing for you to kill yourself without troubling the enemy to act. When our mission is done I can tend to you properly and get you back to fighting shape, but until then you will hold back.'

Every emotion Ghazin had told him he had to fight. A noble son of Obsidia did not back down, even when it would be logical to do so, and that was a trait an Astral Knight kept. But he also knew Saahr was right. If he invalidated himself by fighting when he should not, he would rob the Chapter of a battle-brother as surely as an enemy who killed a Space Marine in battle.

'I must at least keep up,' said Ghazin.

Saahr was replacing Ghazin's breastplate. The device he had inserted was a small tube that Saahr fed through one of the life-sign ports on the breastplate. 'This will keep the pressure from building up,' he said. 'On your feet.'

Ghazin felt as weak as a child as he climbed to his feet. His legs seemed only barely able to support his weight. His bolter felt heavier than when he had first picked it up as a new recruit, before the augmentations had given him the strength to wield it properly. He had been hurt before in battle, for no Astral Knight went any length of a career without an enemy finding its mark on him, but never this badly.

Hyalhi and the honour guard had fended off the last of the necrons and were moving through the corpse processing chamber. The other members of the honour guard reacted much as Felhidar had done, swearing to destroy Borsis to pay it back for the crimes of its inhabitants. Though the World Engine had destroyed whole worlds and countless Imperial citizens, to see the dehumanisation of their corpses, living people reduced to a commodity like so much building material or currency, brought the evil of it sharply into focus. Before, Borsis could have been considered a force of nature like a supernova or an asteroid impact, something that was destructive but without will or malice. But what they saw here was malice. There was no other interpretation. The World Engine had been respected and feared – Borsis could only be hated.

'Those they do not need as slaves,' said Hyalhi, examining the larger processing unit, 'who are surplus or flawed, are brought here. The necrons must have a use for the materials they render from them. These warriors clothe themselves in their skin but that does not account for such an elaborate effort to process so many corpses.'

'Then what do they do with it all?' wondered Felhidar.

‘If we are to answer that question,’ said Hyalhi, ‘then we must know more. It is the same obstacle that must be overcome if we are to take the fight to the necrons or to cripple the World Engine. We must know more. That is why we are down here. Borsis wants to tell us its secrets and we must find a way to listen.’

Ghazin limped up to the rest of the squad. The floor around them was littered with shattered necron parts and scraps of skin. ‘Take comfort that the machine came off worst,’ said Felhidar, looking at Ghazin’s wounds. ‘And my thanks for finishing what I started.’

‘Well, I saw you were out of your depth,’ replied Ghazin. ‘It would not have been very brotherly to leave you wriggling around on the floor.’

‘They’re stopping,’ said Saahr. He was right – one by one the conveyors and arrays of paring blades were clanking to a halt.

‘We must have damaged them,’ said Brother Masadh.

‘All of them?’ asked Felhidar.

Ghazin looked down at movement around his feet to see dozens of the tiny scarabs scuttling around the floor, weaving between the Astral Knights.

Hyalhi crouched down to watch them more closely. They scurried past him into the depths of the corpse processing chamber. The last machines were falling silent, leaving corpses half-dismembered over the conveyors. ‘Follow them,’ said Hyalhi. ‘Stay wary.’

The Astral Knights moved with Hyalhi deeper into the chamber. Every one of them was still expecting a necron warrior, draped in oozing skin, to leap at them from behind one of the machines. Ghazin crunched through the fallen remains of shattered necrons as he took up the rear, each step sending bolts of pain up through his body. The scarabs were swarming over the back wall of the chamber. There were thousands of them now, a glistening carpet of tiny metal bodies.

Sparks fell from the wall as the scarabs cut through the bloodstained steel. The Astral Knights instinctively spread out, ready to riddle whatever came through the wall with bolter fire. Ghazin could barely hold his bolter up and found himself leaning against the nearest machine.

The scarabs finished boring through the wall and rolled back as the cut section fell in. It landed with a loud boom and the scarabs swirled across the ceiling now, forming a huge symbol over the Astral Knights heads. It was a familiar symbol, one that Techmarine Sarakos had speculated was a glyph from the necrons’ language.

Help.

The entrance was dark. It was just wide and tall enough for a Space Marine to walk through upright. Hyalhi waved Brother Masadh forwards and he took the lead.

The pathway was narrow. It wound through maintenance ducts and support struts holding up the mass of Borsis above. Ghazin struggled second to last in the marching order, Apothecary Saahr holding him up when his legs threatened to collapse. The smell down here was old dust and dried-out machine oil, a welcome change from the fresh blood and decaying meat of the processing chamber.

‘Stay your hands, brothers,’ voxed Hyalhi from ahead. ‘This is the message Borsis wants us to hear. Let us listen before we default to destroying it.’

The Astral Knights spread out into a wider space ahead. There was no light here save for the faint glow from the Space Marines’ eyepieces. Ghazin’s enhanced vision rendered it a monochrome world of ghosts.

The chamber was an incidental void between two foundations or support columns, never meant for any particular use. The walls and floor were steel beams. The ceiling was a mass of pipes and cables. Lubricant dripped from metal stalactites and pooled in stained oily puddles.

Another machine stood in the chamber. It was not constructed with the alien efficiency of everything else the Astral Knights had encountered on Borsis. It was built principally of human brains – fresh, wet brains arranged like bunches of fat pink berries around a construction of pistons and valves. The scarabs gathered around the foot of the machine, swarming over it, tending to the brains and the strands of tissue that connected them to the machine.

‘This world has nothing but horrors for us,’ snarled Felhidar.

‘A horror perhaps,’ said Hyalhi. ‘But Borsis kept it well hidden.’

‘From the slaves?’ asked Brother Masadh.

‘Or from the necrons,’ said Hyalhi. ‘This place is far from the eyes of whatever beings rule Borsis. I would wager the creatures here were not part of their armies. They were scavengers, picking over the detritus of the necron civilisation. This is the right place to hide a secret, so far from view.’

The scarabs withdrew a long steel probe from the entrails of the machine – Ghazin saw they might be literal entrails, going by the dark red slithering mass that churned inside its casing. The valves clacked as the scarabs held the probe out – it was a thin silver spike, connected by tangles of slick wire to the brains and valve arrays.

‘It wants to communicate,’ said Hyalhi. ‘Our duty is to listen. Watch my back, brothers. The necrons may have more warriors down here.’ Hyalhi reconfigured his psychic hood, hinging back the segment that arched over his head. His hair was shorn close and he had several ports in the back of his cranium, linked to the psychic circuits of the hood by short cables – these he unhooked, leaving his mind temporarily unshielded.

Hyalhi knelt before the machine. The scarabs extended the probe.

‘Lord Hyalhi,’ said Felhidar. ‘We have no idea what these machines wish of us. This could be a trap for all we know. Let one of us...’

‘I expect more of you, brother!’ snapped Hyalhi. ‘A leader among the Astral Knights must be ready to risk the lives of his battle-brothers, but never their minds. This is not a sacrifice I can demand of anyone else. It must be me or no one else. You know this full well, and your false valour serves no purpose.’

Hyalhi leaned towards the machine and the probe extended. The tip of it touched his temple.

‘Wait,’ said Ghazin. He struggled forward through his squadmates to Hyalhi’s side. ‘Hyalhi, you speak of sacrifice. But we need not make one at all.’

‘Enough of this,’ said Hyalhi. ‘We must...’

‘Hear me out,’ retorted Ghazin. ‘I cannot fight until I reach a proper apothecarion facility, which we will not find on this planet. And we all know there is every chance none of us will ever leave Borsis. That means I am as good as dead to this Chapter. I cannot fight and in all likelihood never will again. So sacrificing my mind and my life is no sacrifice at all. But your mind is one of the greatest weapons this Chapter has. You have no right to put it at risk.’

Hyalhi stepped back just as the probe broke his skin. A drop of blood ran down his temple.

‘I never considered you so insubordinate, Brother Ghazin,’ he said.

‘But I am right,’ said Ghazin.

Hyalhi stood aside. Ghazin removed his helmet and half-fell to his knees in front of the machine. He shivered in the sudden chill of the air against his sweating face.

The scarabs slid the probe towards him and he bowed his head to meet it. It was a wonderful relief that he felt then. He had a purpose still, even if he could not heft a bolter or wield a chainsword. He would not be denied his chance to sacrifice everything he had on the altar of victory.

Was it selfish to desire the chance to make that sacrifice? Was it a dereliction of his duty to pursue it too eagerly? He banished the idea. This was not the time for doubt.

His train of thought was broken by the hot scream of the silver probe being thrust through his right eye.

Ghazin needed something to hold on to. The first thing that came into his mind was the image of a shield split asunder, as if by the blow from a battleaxe or a greatsword. He had seen it in many forms, from the actual article mounted on a wall to the stylised shape worn as a brooch or a belt buckle. Now he saw it as a painted crest, surrounded by the names of a dozen ancestors, topped with a crown of ancient Obsidia.

House Suulkeyar had been kings once. They never saw their present state as a fall from that time. It was instead an evolution, a continuous existence through all the upheavals of their planet’s history that no other bloodline had survived intact. They were proud that their ancestors

had once worn the crown, and the emblem of the sundered shield represented all the battles they had weathered to keep it.

Ghazin was a son of House Suulkeyar. His people had explored the shores of the Sea of Sorrow and fought the wretches of House Janiak. He was one of a long line of sons who had marched as Astral Knights, a past Chapter Master among them. He kept the sundered shield in his thoughts as the probe's icy agony ran right through his mind.

He could see through his remaining eye as the Astral Knights rushed to his side to keep him from toppling over onto the floor. He could see the brains hooked up to the machine pulsing and the valves hissing vapour as the machine worked frantically. But over that was ghosted another image, one of churning nothingness, a mess of colour and form like madness given shape.

He heard a sound like a choir of a thousand voices howling out of tune. Hot and cold ran up and down him as if fingers of ice and fire were raking at his skin under his armour. He smelled blood and burning steel. The room felt like it was tilting around him, though the augmentations to his inner ear meant a Space Marine could never lose his balance. Every sense was wrenched aside by the information coursing into him from the machine.

Brother Felhidar knelt and removed his helmet, and was shouting at Ghazin. Ghazin could see his lips moving but the words were lost. The mass of colour in his vision resolved into a vague shape – three glowing orbs over a deep circular opening, eyes above a mouth.

Something writhed inside Ghazin's head. He could feel it slithering around the inside of his skull. Cold, quivering tendrils wormed into his brain. He could feel each one as it penetrated deeper. Panic, exultation, sorrow and anger washed over him as the upper brain functions were fired off at random.

The face resolved further and receded. Ghazin saw now an alien form on a throne, in a mighty palace with walls of fire. He was hit by such roaring noise and punishing heat that he felt sure he was inside a star, looking at the being that ruled at the heart of it.

Its skin was of multi-coloured flame. It had several pairs of arms, each one carrying an implement of rule – a sceptre, an orb, a sword, the jawbone of a vast spacefaring beast. Its three-eyed face was topped with a headdress of gold and deep blue. Ghazin had an impression of immense size and, above all, awesome and terrible power.

Thousands of creatures bowed to the throne. Their hunched shapes were covered in dark blistered skin, scorched by the malice of the fire. Some wore similar headdresses and carried regal implements in imitation of the enthroned being. Ghazin recognised the xenos whose statues adorned some of the structures of Borsis – not the necron tech-constructs, but their fleshly counterparts the Astral Knights had only encountered as memorials.

Ghazin was aware of Apothecary Saahr bending over him and administering a shot of drugs into Ghazin's neck. But most of his perception was taken up by the scene inside the heart of the star.

The being on the throne reached out a hand.

It did not use words. It could not articulate them through this medium. Instead the concepts it was trying to communicate were forced into all Ghazin's senses.

It was afraid and in pain. Ghazin felt a taste of acid, like bile, and a thin howling met a sense of being crushed beneath a cold, clammy weight.

It was angry. A thousand tiny lightning bolts crackled across the inside of Ghazin's skull. He tasted foulness and rot.

But a sense of triumph rose up and overwhelmed him. The sound was like trumpets. A wind heavy with bolter smoke buffeted his mind. It was powerful but distant, and Ghazin realised the distance was time. It was a promise.

There was too much raw power in this information to make out details. Perhaps Ghazin's mind was too small, or the communicating being had no experience in tailoring its message to a human brain. But Ghazin understood the broadest and most important strokes.

He forced himself to focus away from the scene of terror and splendour, and focus on what was around his physical form. His battle-brothers were holding him up. One was pinning his arms to his sides, for he was convulsing. With an enormous effort he brought them further into

focus and the fires now burned behind the faces of Felhidar and Saahr as they yelled words at him that he could not hear.

‘It is trapped here!’ cried out Ghazin. He could not make out his own words but the rawness of his throat told him he was yelling them. ‘It rages at the lords of Borsis! It is full of hatred and power! It promises victory. We have... we have an ally on this world...’

Ghazin felt a line of red pain as the probe slipped out of his eyeball. He felt the hot spray of blood down his cheek. The image of the star’s heart receded, reduced to a frame of fire burned into his mind’s eye.

The last scrap of information that had got through to him was more coherent, more specific. A collection of sounds and inflections. A name. It was the core of the message sent to him. It had to be important. Borsis had risked much to force it into Ghazin’s brain.

‘Yggra’nya...’ gasped Ghazin.

Ghazin’s mind imploded under the weight of the information pressed into it. He slumped to the floor and his one good eye rolled back in his skull. The world turned scarlet, then black, and then it was gone.



Medicae Obscurum Kalliam Helvetar
Addendum personal
Inquisitorial Eyes Only

I am forced to ask the question: how many times can I die before I die for real?

When I was young, I dwelled often on death. A girl raised in a hive city could hardly watch a day go by without thinking about it. People died. I saw them die – we were middle hivers, but still the violence reached us. I saw a man shot down on the rushway by gunmen in a passing hoverplane. My mother told me perhaps he had made them angry or owed them money. She told me not to stare, and to hurry on.

I saw my uncle die. He had contracted gutworm from the contaminated waters by the docks. He looked more like a skeleton than a living man. He held me close in the last days and told me how lucky I was. There were twenty-five million people in the hive with less than me, and only five or six million with more. I would live a good Emperor-fearing life. I should rejoice with every day. Then he died, and I did not understand how I could rejoice when nothing I did in Telenact Hive could possibly mean anything to the Emperor. When I died nobody would notice, just like nobody noticed when my uncle died, or the man on the rushway.

It was always about death. My studies under the medicae were about death. I thought they would enable me to help people, but in truth the duties of a medicae were simply containing the worst diseases and disposing of the unfortunate. We were running to stand still. No one cared what we did. The Emperor certainly didn't. I passed hangars full of corpse-slabs with bodies to be processed and burned. Death was everywhere – I steeped myself in more of it, not less.

I wish I could say it was determination that brought me to the Holy Ordos of the Inquisition but it was mostly chance. Perhaps my uncle was right about how lucky a girl his Kalliam was. An interrogator in service to Lord Inquisitor Rhaye – no one knew that then, of course – was seeking heretics who had come to hide in Telenact Hive. I showed him the corpse hangars so he could search them for signs of warpcraft inflicted on the bodies. I performed the task because I was reliable and dour, and the medicae decided I would give the bearer of the Inquisitorial rosette the right impression about how they went about their business. I spent four days there, examining corpses. Death, again, filled my world.

I was taken off-world to perform the same task elsewhere. I went to a dozen worlds, but all I saw of them was the places they kept their dead. I stank of dead flesh and chemical preservatives, and I could never wash it off. I was immersed in death. It seeped from my pores.

I wonder now if Lord Rhaye saw that. Maybe it was a coincidence he had me trained in performing autoseances. He has thousands of agents and staff, and many of them have backgrounds like mine, but of all of them he chose me to delve into the minds of the newly dead and sift through whatever is left there. Perhaps the task can only be performed by someone for whom death is more real than her own life. I have not asked him. The commands of a Lord Inquisitor are not to be questioned.

But I have never myself died, not until the commencement of this autoseance. I had often wondered what death would be like, when it came. Would it hurt? Would I continue to see and hear as they bagged me up and carried me to the slab, until they cut me open or slid me into the incinerator? Would the Emperor really be there waiting for me, or would I cease to exist and somehow experience what it is like to not experience anything? But it turns out I had always been wrong.

Death is the realisation of what we really are. In death I see a million stars, in a single galaxy with millions of counterparts across an infinite universe. A galaxy could wink out of existence and it would mean nothing against that enormity. But I am just one piece of flesh and bone and

blood, on one space station orbiting one chunk of rock, which in turn orbits one of the stars that makes up a single galaxy. I mean nothing. Nothing I will ever do can ever mean anything. To die is to be confronted with that truth.

I died when Captain Sheherz died. Perhaps a Space Marine sees it differently – they are full of pride and certainty. Maybe even in the moment of death he still believed that his duty was a worthy calling, that the Emperor's work really was being done through his sacrifice and really did mean something against the backdrop of the universe. I hope so. The same goes for Brother Ghazin. I hope he still believed when his mind was annihilated.

And I myself have died, though only in a technical sense. I fell unconscious and my heart and lungs stopped. It was not for long enough to render me permanently dead. I do not remember any sensation of that at all.

So, I have died now several times. Looking back it was inevitable that to have spent a life surrounded by death meant that a single death would not be enough for me. Eventually one of those deaths will be the last, but the Emperor only knows if it will be after this autoseance is completed, or during it.

I suspect Lord Rhaye will wish to receive the intelligence I have gathered in person. I suspect it is too sensitive for broadcast. I would very much like to see him again. I hope I live until he gets here.

I have completed the mandatory rest period after contacts. I must again attempt to regain contact with the residual memories in the target corpse's brain. I shall void-safe this addendum personal entry – I do not think it would be wise for it to be read by anyone else. With luck, further entries will be less maudlin.

– Medicae Obscurum Kalliam Helvetar



FOUR

Assault-Captain Zahiros

‘The Chaplains told us to leave our family behind,’ said Zahiros. His voice would have been lost in the howl of the wind without the vox-net, for the side doors of the Stormraven gunship were open to let the gunners deploy their mounted heavy bolters. ‘But we know that can never be true. I am the son of Kelvanah Dokhari Ban Avicann! The Kelvanah die for their brothers and persecute their foes! And as an Astral Knight, I do no less!’

Two squads of Astral Knights were harnessed into the back of the Stormraven *Damoclean*, led by Sergeants Daharna of the Second Company and Ehranth of Zahiros’s own Eighth. Between the two rows of Space Marines were a dozen slaves, clinging to whatever handholds they could find as the gunship weaved between the towering structures of Borsis. These slaves, liberated by the force led by Zahiros, were next to useless in combat but were nevertheless the key to the operation. Borsis had a weakness, and the slaves knew how to exploit it.

‘You, Daharna!’ said Zahiros, pointing at the sergeant. ‘You were born into the Lokinsae bloodline. Duellists and soldiers without compare. I know you will not abandon the pride in your family colours, not now, not this day!’ Zahiros turned to the second squad on the gunship. ‘Brother-Sergeant Ehranth! Will you deny your duty to cover House Ghulan in glory? Or how it drives you to deliver ever greater destruction to our enemy? We have been taught by the Codex to abandon all we are when we take on the colours of a Space Marine. But we are Astral Knights. Our house banners are written on the inside of our hearts. Obsidia will tell legends of this day. Pride and fury, my brothers! Pride and fury!’

The cityscape of Borsis hurtled by as the gunship swung down a canyon of towers and spires. It seemed the greater proportion of the planet was covered in the necron city, its districts connected by vast metallic roadways that crossed the rust wastes glimpsed in the distance. Even the wastelands were not natural – they seemed the oxidised remains of past cities, left to decay and be cannibalised to form new districts in an endless cycle of building and destruction.

‘Below us,’ voxed Brother Mhorn from the cockpit. ‘Captain, they’re on the move.’

Zahiros made his way to one of the heavy bolter ports. The gunner, one of Squad Daharna, stepped aside. Zahiros leaned out of the gun port to get a good view of the city below.

Between the towers and palaces ran a glittering river of necron warriors. Hundreds of ranks of them marched. The column snaked off through the city, too far for Zahiros to follow. An elaborate barge of bronze and steel moved at their head, with a trio of necron crewmen around a throne on which sat another necron in the golden headdress and bejewelled finery Zahiros had seen in the statues and pictograms all over the city. It was the first time Zahiros had seen any members of the necron aristocracy. The barge had a form of anti-grav propulsion and drifted over the heads of the necron ranks.

Cannon-armed necrons, taller and bulkier than the rank and file, marched on the flanks. Metallic spiders crawled with their attendant scarab swarms. A massive war machine, bristling with weapons, walked on three legs into the heart of the army. Another aristocrat moved on foot surrounded by a phalanx of elite warriors carrying halberds or swords and energy shields, covered in gold and lacquered decoration.

‘They’re headed for Amhrad’s position,’ said Zahiros. ‘Get a message on the command vox.’

Warn the Chapter Master. The necrons might have been slow to mobilise but they have their strength moving now and the whole Chapter united could not stand before them in open battle for long.'

This was why Amhrad had sent Zahiros on his mission. The Astral Knights could not fight all of Borsis at once. Even a thousand Space Marines could only defeat so many xenos. No, they had to do what the Space Marines did best – strike hardest and fastest at the most vulnerable point of the enemy, so with a vital strut broken the whole edifice of opposition collapsed. The Codex Astartes had described such a strategy in exhaustive detail. It was a part of the Codex that Zahiros could agree with.

'You!' said Zahiros, pointing at one of the slaves. 'Come forward! Tell me what you see!'

The slave clambered uncertainly to the gun port. He had the lean, well-worked look of all Borsis's slaves, and wore the hieroglyph brand denoting which aristocrat owned him. All the slaves Zahiros had found wore the same brand – they were the property of Lord Hixos, whose position in Borsis's society was granted by his ownership of tens of thousands of human captives. This slave's name was Percicel, and he had been a frontier world preacher before the World Engine had darkened the skies over his planet. The others looked towards him for leadership, and before the gunship had departed he had led them in prayer.

Percicel leaned as far as he dared out of the gun port, squinting in the wind. He had a leathery, bearded face, lined first by a lifetime on the frontier and then by the hardship of Borsis. The scars on his neck from the collar were dark and old. 'The twin horns on the horizon!' he yelled over the noise of the wind and the gunship's engines. 'That is the western tower, the Tower of Worms!'

Zahiros could see the twin curved horns Percicel was pointing out. They topped a slender tower that seemed a part of a much larger complex sprawling across a good portion of the city. It was several minutes' flight away. 'Then we are on the right track.'

'We are, Lord Zahiros! Look to the stained-glass roof of the central building. It will deliver us straight to the throne room!'

Zahiros's weapons were strapped to the ceiling of the passenger compartment – his power sword and storm shield emblazoned with the crossed blades of the Astral Knights. He wanted more than anything to have them in his hands again and tear into the foes of the Imperium. This was an honest fight. The whole of Borsis was the enemy and anything the necrons threw at him was a justified kill. No complications, no dilemmas, just the certainty of duty and the joy of destruction.

The gunship swung away from the columns of necrons and weaved between a series of lower towers. Everywhere were the faces of Borsis's lords, rendered in hieroglyphs on the sides of buildings or standing as statues lining the streets. The necrons depicted themselves as god-kings ruling as divine beings over Borsis, but the slaves had not been fooled. They hated the necrons not just for the suffering they had undergone, but for the fact that the necrons dared set themselves up as such gods. The slaves were citizens of the Imperium, and the only god they knelt to among the stars was the Emperor.

'Contacts on the sensors!' came a vox from the cockpit. 'In the air and moving fast!'

'Brace!' ordered Zahiros. Panic passed among the slaves. Percicel went to them and told them to pray. Zahiros stood aside as the gunners swung out the heavy bolters. He glimpsed a darting black shape rocketing through the sky parallel to the *Damoclean*, banking sharply to avoid the structures between them.

The gunship flew lower, the underside of the hull threatening to clip the statues of necron aristocrats. Another craft arrowed in from overhead – it was crescent-shaped, the curves of its wings swept forward, made of segments of dark overlapping steel. It was necron in design, no doubt. Bolts of fizzing green energy ripped down from its wingtip cannon, tearing holes in the street and buildings around the *Damoclean*.

Sarakos had transmitted the few details he possessed about the gauss weapons of the necrons. They used something akin to teleporter technology, but far more precise and refined, to strip away the layers of a target atom by atom. The Imperium had no technology that came

close. The gauss principles of necron weaponry were pure witchcraft to the most learned of magi. The only real intelligence they had was the effect gauss weaponry could have on flesh, armour and fortifications alike. With sufficient weight of firepower, a target simply ceased to be.

The gunner beside Zahiros rattled off a chain of fire into the sky, the tracer rounds darting around the wings of the necron fighter as it spiralled out of range.

'Get us to the target!' voxed Zahiros to the cockpit. 'You need not return, my brothers. This craft need not survive. Just get us to the target!'

The second fighter slewed in around a junction up ahead, heading right for the *Damoclean*. The gunship shuddered as its nose weaponry opened fire. Streaks of crimson las sliced down the street into the necron's left wing. The fire from the fighter burst against the starboard wing and engine of the gunship even as the fighter dipped suddenly to one side and slammed into one of the buildings. Multicoloured flame burst out from it and hundreds of layers of material were flashed away from the surrounding steel, as if a century's worth of corrosion ate through the building in a split second.

The *Damoclean* turned its nose to the sky and climbed. The wounded engine barked and coughed alarmingly. The gunship was struggling to maintain height and stay on course.

'Thirty seconds out!' came the vox from Mhorn in the cockpit.

'Prepare to disembark!' ordered Zahiros. 'To arms, my brothers! We will not have the luxury of a comfortable landing, but our enemies will not have the luxury of a warning! Show the pride and show the fury, and this battle will be done before the enemy know we are there!'

Squads Daharna and Ehranth were drawing their chainswords from the stowage overhead and checking the load of their bolt pistols. They undid the grav-harnesses holding them in, for the risk of being thrown from the gunship in a crash was less than the risk of spending precious seconds undoing the restraints under fire. Daharna inserted his hands into the twin lightning claw gauntlets strapped to the ceiling above him. Ehranth had his power maul in his hands. It was not a weapon favoured by most Astral Knights, who were raised to fight with swords and all but worshipped the elegance of fine bladework, but it suited Ehranth perfectly. Ehranth had been almost the height and bulk of a Space Marine before he was recruited into the Chapter, and grew up battering his opponents into submission.

The second fighter swept down from above. It passed in front of the twin horns of the Tower of Worms, which were just a few seconds away now. A glittering cascade of fire rained down, and among it a sliver of dark metal.

A bomb. The gunship was flying low to cut down the angles of fire, but that meant it was low enough to be caught in the blast.

The gunship rose again, but too late and the shockwave of the explosion slammed into the underside. Astral Knights and slaves were thrown against the ceiling of the passenger compartment. Zahiros was knocked senseless for a moment and so it seemed the explosion hit without sound, except for the jangling in his ears as he was thrown back against the floor as the gunship lurched.

Then, he could just make out the scream of the failing engine. The rear ramp swung open and the ground hurtled past. The gunship was bucking and falling as Brother Mhorn tried to gain height – the engines were too far gone to land properly, and it was either keep going or fall out of the air.

'We're going down, brethren!' voxed Mhorn.

'Get us above the building!' voxed Zahiros. 'Brothers! Jump on my mark!'

The gunship rose up once more, the cityscape of Borsis yawing sideways. The Tower of Worms passed by, its walls of blackened steel broken by small dark windows from which hung ribbed cabling like articulated serpents.

Zahiros pulled his storm shield down and hooked it over his shoulder, then grabbed his power sword. With his free hand he caught up Percicel, who was light enough for Zahiros to carry under his free arm.

The brothers were on their feet. With the bulk of their jump packs there was little room to manoeuvre in the compartment as they lined up ready to jump. Some of them followed Zahiros's

lead and grabbed the slaves, who were numbed by the din and terror into compliance.

The buildings' rooftops streaked by. Flights of metallic creatures were roused from their roosts by the roar of the gunship's dying engines. Pitted expanses of steel bore endless rows of necron hieroglyphics.

'Now!' ordered Zahiros. With Percicel still under his arm, he jumped off the ramp.

Zahiros's jump pack fired and the twin jets fought to arrest his fall. He had made hundreds of combat jumps, but never from a wounded gunship that was moving so much faster than a safe jump speed. The rooftop rocketed towards him. He cut the jets at the last second and took the impact on his back, so he could cradle Percicel in front of him and protect him from the worst.

The roof gave way beneath Zahiros. Darkness spun around him as he fell. He gunned the jets again and his reactions were enough to slow him down a little before he hit the floor below. A little, but not much.

The floor hit Zahiros hard enough to black him out again for a second. He woke to find himself on his back with Percicel curled up on top of him. A shaft of grey light fell through the hole he had torn in the roof. Another Astral Knight punched through the roof, landing harder than Zahiros. Zahiros could hear the booms as other Astral Knights landed on sections of the roof that could support them. Another couple dropped through the holes, able to slow their fall properly with bursts from their jump packs.

The body of a slave hit the roof and tumbled through one of the holes. From the way it fell, Zahiros could tell the slave was dead. Percicel rolled off him and moaned, holding his chest. He, at least, had survived.

'Mhorn!' voxed Zahiros. 'Come in, Brother Mhorn!'

There was no reply.

'Sound off, sergeants!' voxed Zahiros as he clambered to his feet. He turned over Percicel – the slave was conscious, holding his ribs but without apparent life-threatening injuries.

'All eight down, captain,' came the reply from Sergeant Daharna. 'One broken arm, but we can all fight on.'

'We're down,' said Ehranth.

'Group on me,' voxed Zahiros. He tried to take stock of his surroundings. He was in a chamber with fluted black steel walls that soared so high it was like lying at the bottom of a vast metal canyon. The only light came from the holes he and his brothers had torn in the roof. A film of filthy water dripped from the ceiling into grimy pools on the floor.

A necron machine with an ungainly spherical body and several jointed limbs watched with glowing green eyes. It appeared to be an unarmed maintenance machine. It clambered slowly along the wall, spinning patches of metallic threads over areas of corrosion. Another couple of machines fluttered on thin steel wings. Perhaps they were maintenance or reconnaissance machines, or perhaps some form of machine-life native to Borsis.

The Astral Knights dropped down from above, using their jump packs to land safely. The brother who had fallen just after Zahiros, from Ehranth's squad, was helped to his feet by the sergeant himself. Zahiros counted ten slaves who had been grabbed by the Astral Knights and had survived the drop.

'Percicel,' said Zahiros. 'Are you still with us?'

'But barely,' said Percicel. 'I think I have broken a rib.'

'Can you walk?'

'Yes.'

'It may not be easy to keep up.'

Percicel grinned weakly. There was blood on his teeth. 'Fate did not bring me to Borsis so I would have things easy,' he said.

'Where are we?' asked Zahiros.

Percicel looked around. 'Mala,' he called to another slave, a woman, who had reached the ground unharmed. 'Do you recognise this place?'

Mala had a long, lean face and body, and old tribal scars underneath her newer marks of slavery. 'I did not come here often,' she said. Zahiros detected a strange accent to her voice and

guessed she was a native of Percicel's frontier world, converted to the worship of the Emperor by his preaching. 'The lord I attended did not stray out this far. But yes, I have been here before. Over there lies the Tower of Worms. The heart of the complex is that way.'

'Good,' said Percicel. 'She can lead us, Lord Zahiros.'

'Tenstan could do better,' said Mala. 'But he lies there.' She pointed at the body which had fallen from above. It was a pale, crumpled heap of limbs. 'So I will have to do.'

'How far?' asked Zahiros.

'A walk of an hour, through the halls of the ancestors,' said Mala. 'They are well-guarded. But there are secret ways I know that will cut that time in half. We must move quickly, for the lychguard will be closing in on us even now.'

'Then we move,' said Zahiros. 'Brothers, make speed and do not tarry! The necrons will try to slow us down but they will fail. On us lies the responsibility to begin the end of this battle. When Borsis burns, it will be us who set the fire!'

Mala set off to a corroded alcove in the wall. She slid her body between two folds of jagged metal and activated a hidden catch. A segment of the wall swung open, just wide enough for a Space Marine. The Astral Knights followed her, and the surviving slaves kept pace as best they could.

Zahiros unhooked his storm shield. His power sword was hungry – it had cut down necrons already on this world, but they had been rank and file warriors of whom he now knew there were uncountable numbers on Borsis. It wanted something more, a kill that would be memorialised in the mosaics and sermons of Obsidia.

He remembered the voice of Sarakos, deadpan as ever, as if the Techmarine had no understanding of the glory hinted at by his words.

They have a weakness.

They have a leader.

No slave had ever seen the Overlord of Borsis. Human eyes were not permitted to look on him. The necron leaders were creatures of infinite arrogance and they fancied themselves gods. Something long ago in their history had brought them low, and they compensated now by dressing their construct-bodies in the garb of divine kings and dwelling in vast steel temples to themselves.

No slave had ever looked on the king who styled himself a god on Borsis. His glory was such that the necrons boasted human eyes would be burned out to gaze on it, and slaves were not permitted to get close enough to prove them wrong. But a handful among the slaves, including Mala, had attended on lords who were regularly called into his presence.

He was named Heqiroth.

He was a hero on Borsis. Grand monuments commemorated his overthrow of a spineless incompetent named Turakhin, and the winnowing away of the weakling dynasties who had supported the previous lord of Borsis. Turakhin's own Magadha dynasty had been obliterated from monuments and rolls of past rulers, the scars and broken statues as proudly displayed in their own way as images of Heqiroth himself. The Nephrekh dynasty, noblest and most ancient dynasty of Borsis, had taken up its rightful place at the top of the aristocracy with Heqiroth at its head.

The slaves were brutalised and afraid, but they were not stupid. Many came from worlds dominated by the squabbling factions of the Imperial aristocracy, and had journeyed to the frontier worlds preyed on by the World Engine to escape such politicking. They knew that even xenos, with their alien minds and ambitions, would chafe when forced to bow down to a new ruler that many despised, or would look in fear at the dynasties cast down when Heqiroth came to power. Many nobles sought power for themselves. Many wanted to carve out their own petty empires or simply pursue their own goals without the intrusion of a higher authority. And when the necrons expressed such frustrations, they sometimes forgot about the human slaves that attended on them.

Without Heqiroth, a period of stasis would ensue as the dynasties fought to fill the power

vacuum. Borsis would be weaker than it had ever been, for Heqiroth and his dynasty were still consolidating their power over all of Borsis and plenty of would-be overlords were sharpening their blades to seize any opportunity Heqiroth's fall would bring.

None of them were courageous or powerful enough to take on Heqiroth directly. But an outside force might destroy Heqiroth and leave the throne empty, and the dynasties of Borsis were ready.

The Astral Knights were just such an outside force. Amhrad had ordered the assassination of Heqiroth as soon as Sarakos had named the ruler of Borsis and the rescued slaves had told the Astral Knights where to find the overlord. Zahiros had access both to assault units and the gunship *Damoclean*, and was himself a master swordsman capable as anyone of dealing the killing blow in person. For these reasons Amhrad had given Assault-Captain Zahiros the task of destroying Heqiroth, and turning inevitable defeat on Borsis into a chance of a magnificent victory.

Zahiros knew it would not be easy. Heqiroth was paranoid, the slaves said, and surrounded himself with lychguard protectors at all times. But Zahiros had never faced an enemy in person he had not defeated, and fully intended to skewer Heqiroth on his power sword. His battle-brothers could deal with the lychguard. All Zahiros needed was one good strike.

'Into the fray, brethren! Onward! Onward!'

Zahiros led the charge himself, leaping over the heads of the necron warriors propelled by his jump pack. The necrons had ambushed the Astral Knights as they travelled through the dark twisted steel of the palace complex's heart – or at least, they had tried to.

Zahiros crashed into the rearmost necron warriors. One he almost crushed beneath him as he landed. He lashed out with his power blade, angling the edge down at the last moment as he had been taught in the fencing halls of Obsidia. The necron tried to duck the blade and instead put its neck right into the path of the sword's edge. The power field flashed as the blade sliced the warrior's head off.

The dozen or so necron warriors were slow and inefficient when faced with the fury of the Astral Knights counter-charge. But they were just the first obstacle between the Astral Knights and the throne room of Overlord Heqiroth.

Behind the necron warriors, directing them, was another tech-construct that stood half as tall again. Its body might have resembled those of the skeletal warriors, but was clad in plates of bronze and steel, stained and pitted with age and battle. Its armour was inlaid with patterns of purple, sea green and gold. It stood upright, not hunched, the image of necron pride and arrogance. In one hand it carried a cross between an axe and a sword, the long curved blade running the length of the haft. Greenish energy crackled across the hieroglyphics inscribed on the blade. In its other was a shield almost as tall as the necron itself. The shield's interlocking plates shimmered with their own energy field that bled off into a blue-green haze.

At the sight of Zahiros, it slammed its sword against its shield three times. Zahiros knew a ritual challenge when he saw one – no matter what the tongue, no matter what particular gesture it used, it was impossible to mistake the desire to single out the most powerful foe on the battlefield.

'I will do you a great honour!' said Zahiros, pointing his own sword at the necron. 'And hang your head in the trophy hall!'

The two were from species separated by millennia and light years, but they understood each other perfectly.

A necron warrior tried to tackle Zahiros, but one of Squad Daharna skewered it through the spine with his chainsword and Zahiros shrugged it off. The palace might as well have been empty save for Zahiros and what he assumed was a lychguard, the elite guardians of the necron royalty.

Zahiros opened up a burst of jet exhaust and rocketed into the lychguard, striking with more speed and weight than the construct had expected. It raised its shield just in time and the power field around it buffeted Zahiros away, swatting him against the jagged steel of the wall. He

rolled away from the power blade as it scythed down at him and swung out with the edge of his storm shield.

The weapons of the two duellists mirrored one another, power blade and shield. It could not have been more perfect. Zahiros imagined every movement embroidered in a banner of House Kelvanah and carried by his family's daughters at the head of the summer hunt, or rendered in a mosaic on the floor of the audience chamber.

The shield caught the lychguard in the shin, knocking it onto its knees. Zahiros rose up behind it and sliced down with his power sword. The lychguard met the blade with its own and a crackling white light filled the chamber, strobing from the meeting of the two power blades as their energy fields fought.

Zahiros and the lychguard were thrown back a step by the force of the discharging fields. 'I hope you can understand me,' snarled Zahiros. 'What I do to you, we will do to all your kind. We are humankind, and our gift is extinction.'

The necron's face was a skull of tarnished steel with a single hieroglyph on its forehead. The featureless lower half split open and the halves hinged aside to reveal a set of overlapping mandible plates. From its robotic mouth the lychguard spat a series of grating syllables in the necron tongue. Again, Zahiros did not have to speak the language to know what it said.

I am going to kill you, human.

Zahiros lunged first, the power sword knocked aside by the lychguard's shield. The lychguard's return stroke almost took the top of Zahiros's head off but he pivoted to the side out of its arc and struck again with his shield. The lower edge of the shield hit the lychguard square in the face this time and the power field hurled it to the floor.

Zahiros leapt onto it. The last lesson a swordsman learns is to abandon the sword when another form of offence will lead to victory. He dropped with his knee onto the lychguard's sword arm, trusting in the full weight of his body and armour to pin it to the floor. It would only need to stay trapped for a moment.

Zahiros knocked the lychguard's shield aside with his own. The lychguard's shield was larger than Zahiros's and covered it almost from eyes to floor – but this close that was a hindrance, not an asset. It could not wrest the huge shield in front of it again as Zahiros reversed his grip on his sword with a well-practised motion and stabbed the point down.

Disarm, then despatch.

The power sword's point sheared into the lychguard's shoulder, underneath the edge of its shoulder guard. Steel gave less easily than muscle and bone, but it gave. The power field cracked like a series of gunshots and the lychguard's sword arm was severed.

Zahiros rolled off the necron. It staggered to its feet bleeding sparks and lubricant from the stump of its shoulder. It swung at him with its shield but it was clumsy and Zahiros easily stepped out of the way.

He could toy with it now. He could use every technique he had in his arsenal, running through the drills etched into his memory in the courtyard of his family's summer mansion, and afterwards in the duelling halls of the Astral Knights fortress. And he did for a few seconds, changing guard to spin out of the way of the shield and slice a chunk off the lychguard's chest armour. He punctured the scale-like plates over its abdomen, which on a human opponent would be a particularly cruel killing blow, puncturing the abdominal wall to void the entrails.

It was enough.

Zahiros ducked forwards. The shield came around a moment too late. He stabbed the power sword into the necron's throat and forced it through the armour plates covering its upper chest. The power field cracked and flickered as the blade tore through and finally the head was completely severed.

The lychguard did not fall. Rather, it shut down. Its remaining arm fell to its side and it became as still as one of the statues littering the streets of Borsis.

Zahiros glanced behind him. The Astral Knights had despatched most of the necron warriors and were finishing off the last handful. One of Squad Ehranth had suffered a vicious-looking gauss wound that had penetrated deep into his side, but it looked like he could still fight. As

Zahiros watched, Ehranth himself picked up one of the necron warriors, hefted it into the air and brought it down head-first against his knee guard, shattering its metal skull. The remaining warriors did not last much longer.

The Astral Knights had not tried to intervene in Zahiros's duel. They knew how these things were to be done.

'Mala!' shouted Zahiros. The slave picked her way forward through the fallen necrons. 'How much further?'

'Not far,' said Mala. 'We are nearly there. My lord would sometimes attend secret talks with Overlord Heqiroth, and used a hidden entrance to the throne room. It lies just ahead.'

'Good,' said Zahiros. 'Brothers, onwards!'

Before leading them on, Zahiros paused to pick up the lychguard's severed head. He had promised it a place in the Astral Knights' trophy hall, and House Kelvanah kept its promises.

Through the winding darkness, the Astral Knights came to a great arch of blackened steel. This part of the palace complex was supposed to look ancient and forgotten, with corrosion creeping along its walls and filthy rust-stained pools gathering on the floor. Mala led Zahiros and his men around blind turns and switchbacks until they reached the archway, which seemed to frame nothing but a blank expanse of stained metal.

'I saw my master use this entrance many times,' said Mala. 'Hixos the Slave Lord. I dreamed of seeing him destroyed. I memorised the way so that perhaps I might steal through it alone and level some accusation about him to the overlord. It was a desperate plan. Yours is better.'

Mala's gnarled hands traced a hieroglyph on the wall. The lines lit up in glowing green. A thin line of light appeared around the inside edge of the archway as the door unlatched and was free to swing open.

Zahiros signalled for the Astral Knights to line up at the archway. The assault squads of the Astral Knights considered themselves to hold the position of the greatest honour, for they were the first through the breach in the fortress wall or the airlock of the enemy spacecraft. This was the kind of fight they had trained a lifetime for, an all-out charge into the heart of their enemy. They needed no further direction to line up by the archway, ready to storm through it two abreast.

Zahiros would be the first through. There was no question of that.

Mala returned to the rear of the marching order, with Percicel and the other slaves. Eight slaves had made it this far. The stronger of them had been given combat knives by the Astral Knights – made for Space Marines, the combat knives were the size of swords in the slaves' hands. Percicel handed Mala a decorative necron spear taken from a wall display.

Sergeant Daharna held up an auspex scanner. Its screen bathed his face in flickering blueish light. He shook his head – it was reading nothing. That did not mean anything. It had read nothing moments before the lychguard and its necron warrior cohort ambushed them.

Zahiros did not need to give an order. Both squads knew what was expected of them. He ran shoulder-first into the door and it boomed open before him.

Fifty sets of narrow eye-lenses stared back at him, set into deep metal sockets. Fifty necrons filled the throne chamber of Overlord Heqiroth.

Zahiros took stock of the new battlefield in the moment it took him to take his first step into the chamber. Half of the necrons were lychguard, some with sword and shield like the one he had fought at the ambush, others with two-handed scythes with blades that also thrummed with power fields.

Others were similarly ornate but clad in old, dark bronze, with the coils of elaborate power circuits arching over their heads and shoulders. They carried tall staffs, each topped with a chunk of glowing crystal set into a fan of circuitry.

The chamber was the base of a shaft that soared up to the pinnacle of a tower high above the centre of the palace complex. Endless mazes of hieroglyphics covered the walls and pulses of energy ran up and down through them. A raised block of age-blackened steel held up a throne composed of necron heads, a hundred of them at least, stacked up to form the seat, back and

armrests.

Two necrons stood beside the throne. One resembled the ancient bronze elites, but wore a cloak of segmented silver and carried a pair of matched power swords with blades of blue-edged obsidian. The panels of his armour were picked out in white, crazed like old ceramic.

The second was a head taller than any other in the chamber, its extra height granted by the four legs that supported its massive and intricately decorated torso. A pair of huge shoulder guards flanked a head with five eyes set into its golden mask, each one with an eyepiece of a different colour. Within the gilded cage of its chest nestled a host of roosting scarabs, their carapaces inset with precious stones. It held a polished black orb in one hand and a staff that looked like a necron spinal column in the other. Its body was inset with panels of sea-green and purple, the colours of its dynasty. It was Heqiroth, Overlord of Borsis, and from it flowed all the power the dynasts of Borsis craved.

It was the creature Zahiros had come here to kill.

But it had known he was coming.

Zahiros leapt over the front rank of lychguard. Already the lychguard were charging at the Astral Knights rushing through the archway behind Zahiros. He had barely a second to think and form a plan. It would be simple – batter his way through the lychguard and the elites behind them, force Heqiroth to fight, and kill him. Not necessarily a good plan, but it was all he had.

Zahiros crashed to the ground. One lychguard tried to impale him through the stomach with its two-handed warscythe. Zahiros grabbed its hand with his shield arm and wrenched it off-target, pulling the lychguard in close and shattering its metal face with the pommel of his power sword. The lychguard reeled and Zahiros cut down and away, feeling the power sword smashing through the lychguard's leg. The lychguard toppled to the side and Zahiros moved on – he did not have the time to despatch the necron on the ground. He would trust his battle-brothers to finish the job.

Heqiroth stepped up onto the throne, clambering to tower over the elites around him on his four massive segmented legs. He extended his spinal column staff and pointed to the melee breaking out in the centre of the throne room. His mask shifted, forming a mouth beneath the five eyes.

'Obey!' he yelled.

His voice was a steel avalanche of noise, amplified to ring out over even the gunfire and the scream of chainblades through metal.

Heqiroth had spoken in Imperial Gothic. He was not addressing the Astral Knights.

Zahiros spun around. He fended off a swipe of a lychguard's sword with his storm shield as the first slaves ran through the archway.

Mala was among them, and Percicel. Mala's face was creased with anger – even if she died the moment she entered the fray, it would be worth it just to aim a blow at the necrons. Percicel was terrified, but it was his duty to be there in the melee and lead his flock in person. But one of the other slaves stumbled across the threshold, eyes rolling back, foam suddenly flecking from his mouth.

He was not alone. Half the slaves were the same. They set on the other slaves with sudden brutality. Mala was fast enough to see the maddened slaves coming and spun on her heel to skewer one through the shoulder with her spear. She forced the slave down to the floor, ripped the spear out and punched it through her opponent's throat.

It was as if the slaves had been programmed to turn on their fellow humans, with Heqiroth's order as the trigger. That was probably how the Overlord of Borsis had learned the Astral Knights were coming for him.

Zahiros could not worry about that for the moment. He ducked the sword of the nearest lychguard as Sergeant Ehranth charged in beside him, crashing into the lychguard with all his considerable weight. Zahiros left Ehranth wrestling the lychguard and continued on his path towards Heqiroth.

The bronze-clad elites had not moved. They stood ranked up around their leader before the throne.

‘It’s the praetorians!’ yelled Mala across the throne room. ‘It’s the Judicator!’

The leader of the elites, the Judicator, raised a skeletal hand. The praetorians levelled their staffs as one in Zahiros’s direction. He realised they were taking aim.

Zahiros dropped to one knee and held up his storm shield. Rapid volleys of red and green fire streaked across the throne room and erupted around him. The ground about him was reduced to a mass of bubbling slag. The power field of his shield held for a second and then the shield itself was shredded into flecks of molten ceramite.

He was still alive. The shield had deflected just enough. The armour on his left forearm was pocked and sizzling. He would not survive another volley.

Zahiros gunned his jump pack again. If he cleared the ranks of praetorians, he could reach Heqiroth. It only needed one good blow from his power sword. As formidable as Heqiroth looked, a well-placed slash could take his head off, or a perfect thrust could pierce whatever vital components he carried in his chest. One second, one thought, one strike, and the battle for Borsis would be over.

Tongues of white lightning licked up the walls. On a burst of thrumming power, the Judicator rose up to meet Zahiros as he fell towards Heqiroth. The Judicator slammed into Zahiros, intercepting him perfectly. The two landed in a heap but the Judicator was first onto its feet and grabbed Zahiros by the throat.

The Judicator was far stronger than any necron Zahiros had faced. It swung him around and hurled him against the throne room wall.

The wall collapsed under the impact. Zahiros fell through into a place of darkness and rust. Old combat instincts kicked in and he rolled onto his feet. He tried to raise his shield but realised he no longer had it, and gripped his power sword instead with both hands.

Zahiros stood in a place of rusted finery. Once this place had been lavish, with huge necron masks looming from the walls and the vaults of the ceiling gilded so they resembled the inside of a golden ribcage. Sheets of interlinked metal pieces hung like tapestries, forming images of regal necrons ruling from temples and pyramids. Everything was covered in rust. Holes had opened up in the decoration to reveal the jagged steel of the palace underneath. Pale light fell through tears in the ceiling. The floor was crumbly under Zahiros’s feet.

The Overlord of Borsis celebrated decay as much as he broadcast the grandeur of his rule. Half the palace was magnificent, half a rusted shell. Zahiros could not begin to understand the alien minds of these tech-constructs, who embraced corrosion and glory at the same time.

‘Brothers, if you can hear me,’ said Zahiros over the command vox-channel. There was no reply but static, but perhaps one of the Astral Knights was receiving him somewhere on Borsis. ‘They were waiting for us. The necrons have mind-wiped agents among the slaves. We fight on, brothers, but if we do not prevail, do not trust the slaves. Do not trust the slaves!’

The Judicator stepped through the hole in the wall. The sounds of battle followed it – the Astral Knights were still fighting. The Judicator’s twin blades glimmered in the faint light.

‘Extinction?’ said the Judicator. Its voice was smooth and synthesised, absurdly calm with the gunfire and melee behind it. ‘We were driving species to extinction before your ancestors crawled out of the oceans. While the dynasties slumbered, the praetorians watched as your kind rose and fell. You are not the first we will exterminate. You will not be the last. We killed our gods. Humanity can hold no fear for us.’ Its Imperial Gothic was perfect but formal, as if it was pronouncing a judgement or reading a new law.

The Judicator had echoed the words Zahiros had spoken to the lychguard he had killed. It had been listening in, somehow. Perhaps it had been watching the Astral Knights from the moment they reached the palace.

‘A fool seeks to know the alien,’ spat Zahiros. ‘A wise man seeks only how to destroy it.’

‘Then you are even blinder than most,’ said the Judicator. ‘I would have you understand what we are, human. Perhaps you will understand the grandeur of the necrontyr. Whole species have bowed to us as gods of death and eternity. Humanity could live on in service. You need not die.’

‘Better dead than a slave to the alien,’ retorted Zahiros. He was circling slowly, watching for any suggestion of a weakness or foible in the Judicator’s fighting methods. But the necron was

giving nothing away. The nicks and scratches on its armour spoke of countless battles, and the gleam of its blades was almost hypnotic in the gloom.

‘Truth be told,’ said the Judicator, its voice still cold and level, ‘I had hoped you would say that.’

The necron ran at Zahiros. Zahiros was ready. He parried the three rapid blows that rained against him, forcing his body into the old forms of combat he had trained in before he had taken up the sword-and-shield style. He would rather have a longer and heavier blade, one which he could use two-handed with maximum impact, but his power sword had never failed him and it deserved to have his faith now.

Each blow was too fast to see. It was impossible to react, only to anticipate. The Judicator was as fast as any Space Marine, with the blend of brutality and elegance of the finest duellists on Obsidia.

But in his day Zahiros had fought and beaten those duellists. Before he had been selected as an Astral Knight, he had been a master of the blade. He had never been defeated. He would not be beaten now.

He met every blow with a parry and a counter-stroke of his own. He forced the Judicator back a step, and capitalised with a shoulder barge that threw the necron against the chamber wall. Rust rained down. Zahiros rammed a knee into the midriff of the necron and cracked the pommel against the side of its head. A living creature would have been killed – the Judicator reeled but no more, and trapped one of Zahiros’s arms in its own.

The alien threw Zahiros against the wall. Zahiros took the impact, ducked one blow and spun out of the arc of the next. He hacked down with his sword to slice through shoulder and chest. The Judicator intercepted the blade with its own and Zahiros had to roll away to avoid the follow-up thrust with the second blade.

‘I have fought and killed for sixty million of your years,’ said the Judicator. ‘I will not deny your skill. But your brothers are dying. Your war is over. If you will not serve, die quickly. We are merciful gods. Continue to defy us, and our wrath will not be sated with your deaths.’

‘We have seen your mercy!’ snarled Zahiros. He ached all over. Bones were broken. His armour dispensed painkillers and the numbness shivered through his body. But he could fight on. ‘Slaves turned into bone and meat. No Space Marine will bow to that. You will have to kill us all.’

‘And we will,’ said the Judicator. ‘We have already started.’

Zahiros reversed the grip on his sword and dived at the necron, yelling in anger. His power sword arrowed downwards to spear the necron through the chest. It was a savage, reckless attack, one a crude barbarian might attempt to win through raw strength and fury.

That was what it looked like, at least. The necron raised both blades to trap Zahiros’s sword, wrench it from his hand and throw him to the floor disarmed. Instead Zahiros dropped to the side, pulled his sword out of the Judicator’s reach and drove an elbow into the Judicator’s face. The impact was a satisfying crunch and the Judicator fell back, one eye shattered.

The Judicator had thousands of years of experience in war and showed it in every feint and blade-thrust. But Zahiros had the pure strength of a Space Marine, and he knew well how to use it.

Zahiros stabbed with the sword, aiming for a point just beneath the arm. It was a killing blow, aimed for heart, lungs and spine. The tech-construct’s armoured torso suggested it had components in there that it needed to function, components that would be ripped apart by the sword’s power field.

The Judicator’s sword moved faster than Zahiros could think. It knocked Zahiros’s sword aside, so that it merely scored a deep channel along the side of the necron’s breastplate. The second blade slashed at Zahiros and caught him square in the chest.

The necron blade had its own power field. It burst in a flare of purple light and Zahiros was hurled across the chamber. He hit the edge of an archway leading away from the chamber and throne room. He gasped down a breath and felt ragged heat spreading through his chest, turning into pain. He grabbed the edge of the archway and pulled himself through.

He was hurt. Hurt badly. The sword had cut through the ceramite deep into his chest. The pink, filmy surface of his lung was visible through the torn plate of his fused ribs. Blood foamed as it welled up.

Zahiros took stock of his new location. This chamber was bright and well-maintained. A moat of mercury ran around a central platform with a staff of black metal supporting an engraved cube the size of a man's head. A faint hum vibrated through the silver plates of the floor.

Blood spattered across the silver. A strange feeling ran through Zahiros, spreading from the back of his mind right through him. It was an emotion he had never felt before, and it brought with it a terrible question.

Am I ready to die?

Was this fear? Was this what lesser men felt when they faced death? The concept was appalling. A Space Marine did not feel fear. The Emperor had created the first Space Marine Legions precisely because he needed soldiers without fear. They knew what fear was but they could smother and dismiss it, and Zahiros had brushed aside that glimmer of weakness a million times. But what if the spark of fear was permitted to catch light? Was the result what was running through Zahiros's veins now, threatening to seize up his limbs and paralyse his mind?

The Judicator ran in. It could have just speared Zahiros through the back – it would be a strike with a high percentage chance of ending the fight right there. But instead the necron splashed through the mercury and positioned itself between Zahiros and the cube.

The Judicator cared about the cube. Whatever it was, even if Heqiroth was beyond his reach, Zahiros could still hurt the lord of Borsis. He had a chance to turn the battle even now.

But am I ready to die?

Zahiros limped forwards. More gore tumbled out in clotted, fleshy lumps onto the floor. He held his sword out in front of him as if it was holding him up.

The Judicator raised its guard. There was no way through the twin blades now, not with Zahiros weakened and slowed down.

He wanted very much to turn around and run. It was an obscene thought, a blasphemy. It grabbed hold of him and threatened to control his body like a puppeteer. He had to overcome it. This was the only chance he would have. If it really was fear he felt, and it took hold of him, it would not matter if he died here or not.

Zahiros ran at the Judicator. The Judicator trapped his blade again but Zahiros kept going, throwing his full weight into the necron. A Space Marine at full run was too great a force for even the necron to stop dead and the Judicator fell against the staff, knocking the cube to the floor.

The patterns inscribed into its surface formed a labyrinth. For a moment Zahiros could not look away from the cube as his eyes were forced to follow the endless paths, seeking a way out. But the heat of the pain blurred his vision and the spell was broken.

The Judicator slashed down with its blades. Zahiros's left arm was caught between them and they scissored closed just above his elbow. The sharpness of the pain met the awful blunt horror as his arm fell away, severed so neatly it was a second before the first blood spurted.

Zahiros reached forwards with his right hand, dropping his sword to do so. He and the necron were locked in a death grip now and the blade could not be brought to bear. His fingers just reached the engraved surface of the cube and he snatched it up from the floor.

Zahiros rolled over. The necron's sword was about to plunge down through his throat. Zahiros lashed out with the cube and smashed it against the side of the Judicator's head.

The cube shattered. Fragments of it fell like a rain of tiny silver blades.

Fingers of black energy played across the Judicator, earthing into the floor. Where the bodies of Zahiros and the Judicator lay in the shallow moat of mercury, they formed a bridge and the energy flickered across them to escape through the archway.

The Judicator seemed frozen. The blade was still held over Zahiros, who, disarmed, wounded and one-handed, was barely able to fight back.

A terrible wordless cry rose up from the direction of the throne room. It sounded like a hundred metallic voices raised at once. The whole palace seemed to shake with it, and Zahiros fancied he could hear it echo out between the spires of Borsis. He imagined in that moment the cry

running all the way around the planet like the waves of an earthquake, bathing Borsis in its misery.

And it felt good. It had been worth it, to have taught these aliens the meaning of despair. It was a worthy deed, a victory, and Zahiros was ready to die.

The Judicator grabbed Zahiros by his remaining wrist and dragged him out of the cube chamber, back through the archway and the breach leading to the throne room. Zahiros was numb and his eyes fought to focus. The sounds of the battle, he realised, had died down.

The Judicator hauled Zahiros up so he could see the whole throne room. Squads Daharna and Ehranth lay butchered in the centre of the room where the melee had been fiercest. Ehranth looked to have been the last to die, and around him were the remains of half a dozen broken lychguard. As Zahiros watched some of the fallen necrons clambered to their feet as sundered components knitted back together.

One of the praetorians walked among the bodies. One of the fallen stirred, a battle-brother of Squad Daharna. The praetorian aimed its staff at the Astral Knight's head and fired a blast of energy, obliterating everything above the collar.

Slaves lay dead, too. Zahiros saw Percicel and Mala among their number. Only two still stood and they had the rolled-back eyes and blank expressions of the mind-wiped traitors.

Overlord Heqiroth directed the end of the massacre. He waved a hand and the praetorian executed the two loyalist slaves with a pair of quick energy blasts through the chest. They had served their purpose, and were to be disposed of accordingly.

Heqiroth turned to Zahiros. The Overlord of Borsis was completely unharmed by chainsword or bolter fire.

'Extinction,' he said.

'Your trinket is broken,' said Zahiros. Each word was accompanied by a dribble of blood down his chin. 'What we did here, my brothers will use to destroy you. And we keep our promises.'

Heqiroth nodded at the Judicator. The last thing Zahiros felt was the tip of the Judicator's blade piercing the back of his neck.

And he was ready to die.



*Orbital Supply Station Madrigal 12
High Polar Orbit, Safehold
Varv System*

**Encryption Code Penance
Inquisitorial Eyes Only. Ref. Lord Inquisitor Quilven Rhaye
Scrivened: Medicae Obscurum Kalliam Helvetar**

Following the spiritually corrective rituals made necessary by the previous extended contact, this functionary reported to the orbital station command centre where the station crew informed me of the arrival of a Naval salvage crew. This crew was received into the station's docking bay, observing moral hygiene procedures. Servitors received from the crew an intact one-man saviour pod which was identified as the type ejected by a Thunderblaze-class fighter-bomber. Markings indicated its origin as the carrier platform *Merciless*. The life sign readings indicated the occupant still lived. The saviour pod was taken to the orbital station's sick bay, to which a complement of medicae servitors was seconded.

The occupant was a fighter pilot of the Varv Deliverance Fleet. Her life signs indicated a comatose state. She was removed from the saviour pod and found to be unresponsive.

During preparations for the next contact attempt, the crewman awoke. By this time she had been identified from dogtag electroos as Astronavigator Third Class Asphala Krae. She responded to the presence of this functionary with extreme fear and agitation, and was halted in attempted violence by the restraints that had been put in place as a precaution. Krae was then sedated by the medicae servitors assigned to her.

This functionary heard her shout the name 'Yggra'nya'. The name was by now familiar to this functionary, as it had comprised part of the contiguous sensory relays previously experienced.

A subsequent period of wakefulness was characterised by fractured and semi-lucid utterances. Krae expressed the belief that she was in a throne room or palace structure that existed inside a star, and was the subject of a godlike being who was draining her life force or soul. These claims were accompanied by fluctuating life signs including heart rate, brainwave activity and body temperature. Attempts of violence and threats of the same continued. Further questioning elicited the belief that this functionary was a member of the godlike being's court, and moreover possessed a body of metal.

Medical examination revealed a severe fracture of the skull with accompanying bleeding on the brain. Anaesthesia permitted surgery to be performed via medicae servitor.

Preparations were completed for the next sequence of contact. The psychological and physical stress of the previous contact had been mitigated by increased somatic stabiliser dosage and periods of prayer and mental exercise. The first stages of contact involved severe mental stress which was overcome with emotional dampening techniques. The fragmented sensory relay was duly logged by the cogitator.

Parents weep with a combination of sorrow and pride. My father hands me a wooden sword, the same with which I trained in a time I can no longer remember. I shake my head and give it back to him. I cannot bring it with me. I cannot bring anything with me. Obsidia will remember the man I was, but I will be a different man from now on.

The steel city bleeds out around me as if this world was once a natural planet now haemorrhaging metallic blood. In the distance the sound of marching feet rings out, steel on steel. As we move through the hidden passageways of this alien city a single voice booms as if from the sky. A single word, blared out so loud the whole world must hear it. Obey.

I am cutting the gene-seed from the throat and chest of my battle-brother. These organs are

the seat of our primarch's genetic template, which governs the augmentations of a Space Marine's body. Though my brother's hearts have stopped beating he will not truly die, for these organs will be implanted in a new recruit to carry on his legacy. Then I recall that we may never leave this world and a great sadness washes over me.

A formation of crescent-shaped raptors shrieks across the sky. Green fire drops from their bellies. I can taste the death before it happens. I can feel the agony before it is inflicted. The threads wind inevitably towards the ending of life.

Fluctuating cardiac readings caused the cessation of the contact attempt at this point. During the preparations for resumption it was reported that Astronavigator Third Class Krae had died from massive internal and cranial bleeding, caused by great physical agitation. Krae's behaviour before her death was reported to include utterances to the effect that the god-like being she imagined was removing her physical form and replacing it with one of metal.

This functionary's conclusion is that the great release of exotic energies and the resultant fluctuation in the corresponding region of the warp affected the mind of the comatose Astronavigator Third Class Krae. This was subsequent to the loss of her craft and internment in the saviour pod during the fighter battles at the commencement of the Battle of Safehold.

Following moral and physical hygiene procedures to secure and dispose of the corpse of Astronavigator Third Class Krae, this functionary continued attempted contact, which this time proved successful.



FIVE

Codicier Valqash

Borsis, it turned out, had weather. Even if the planet was entirely artificial, it was still prey to the vagaries of its atmosphere, and the rain that fell from the sky was so heavy with rust it was the colour of old blood.

The Ninth Company and the remnants of the Sixth had made their way to the edge of a vast canyon that cut deep through the cityscape of Borsis. Far below a river of liquid metal raged over silvery rapids. The canyon walls were riddled with passageways and cave systems, the streets and palaces of previous ages. The officers of the makeshift strikeforce had gathered among the columns of a half-collapsed pavilion overlooking the black steel canyon.

‘We keep moving,’ said Captain Khabyar. ‘Until we receive orders to the contrary, our immediate goal is to preserve our own survival and compel the enemy to expend resources in pursuing us.’

‘Captain Sheherz would have taken this to the enemy,’ said First Sergeant Kypsalah, the most senior surviving member of the decimated Sixth Company.

‘Sheherz is dead,’ said Khabyar. ‘If you wish to challenge my command, do so before the judgement of the Chapter Master on Obsidia, as the Codex demands. Otherwise, remain silent on what another commander may or may not do.’

Codicier Valqash looked between the two men. They had never liked one another. The captain of the Ninth Company was a stickler for the Codex and no lover of innovation and reckless aggression, as befitted the commander of a company composed of heavy-weapon-armed Devastator squads. Kypsalah had taken on the aggression of Sheherz, the Master of the Fleet, in favouring attack over defence in all cases. It was no wonder Sheherz had favoured the most direct of tactics – it was easy to charge into the fray in command of a battle-barge, which in most cases was the most devastating weapon in the engagement. On the surface of Borsis, things were different.

‘Whatever we choose,’ said Valqash, ‘we must choose it soon. The necrons are on the move. The Scouts report them within a kilometre behind us. They might move slowly but they never stop and they know this ground better than we do.’

‘Then what do we choose, Codicier?’ asked Kypsalah. He emphasised Valqash’s rank in a way that suggested something less than complete respect.

The first sergeant wanted to stand and fight. The captain wanted to move on and force the enemy to continue pursuing. In such a case it fell to the Librarians of the Chapter to offer their counsel. It was barely a year ago that Valqash had earned the rank of Codicier and first accompanied the Astral Knights to war. He was aware of the gaps in his knowledge. But there was no one else to defer to, and Valqash knew his duty.

‘The necrons could pounce at any moment,’ he said. ‘And this is no ground for a battle. It is not cowardice to deny the enemy the battle they seek. And even if they know Borsis better than we do, we can move across the canyon faster than their thousands of warrior-constructs can. We move on.’

Captain Khabyar nodded with the air of a man who considered the matter settled. He was the oldest man in the whole Chapter – he had been a full battle-brother when Chapter Master

Amhrad was first recruited. There was nothing the enemy or the galaxy could throw at him that could surprise him. To him, this was just another battle.

‘We’re moving,’ voxed Kypsalah to the squads of the Sixth Company.

From the ruins on the edge of the canyon the Astral Knights emerged from their cover. There were about a hundred and twenty battle-brothers in the force that had broken out from the crash site under Captain Khabyar. The red rain washed down the white and blue of their livery. Most of them belonged to Khabyar’s Devastator squads and carried lascannon, missile launchers and heavy bolters. Not ideal for the difficult path across the canyon, but that could not be helped.

Valqash stood at the edge of the pavilion and looked down into the canyon. Pathways led down through the torn metal of the canyon sides, so at least it was possible to make it down and up the other side on foot. He could not tell whether the canyon had been deliberately created or was the result of an earthquake or impact. The Astral Knights did not even know yet whether Borsis was a single machine or whether there was a natural planetoid underneath its metal skin. The World Engine was still keeping its secrets.

Valqash glimpsed the temple first about halfway down, as he was traversing a tight switchback along with a squad of the Ninth Company. It was on the far side, revealed just past a dogleg bend in the canyon. It was several storeys high and fronted with a massive gate inscribed with necron hieroglyphs and pictograms of dynastic rulers seated on vast pyramid-thrones. Unlike the rest of the area it was not ruined or corroded and gleamed bright silver through the haze of incessant rain. Valqash knew instinctively that it was holy ground – that instinct had been with him since his childhood among the nobles of Obsidia, and it had never failed him yet.

It was a sacred place, which meant the necrons had gods. For some reason that thought seemed more ominous than the sight of the ranks of warriors and war machines that were following the Astral Knights. What could count as a god to beings that worshipped themselves?

‘Below us,’ came a vox from up ahead. Valqash went to the edge of the pathway and looked down to the river of liquid metal. The company was halfway down the canyon wall and many of the squads were further along, picking their way along the winding pathways. The strikeforce’s few Scouts ranged ahead to test the footing and it was one of them who had voxed.

The river was rising up in fingers of quicksilver. It formed slabs of glimmering, dripping metal, floating up into the air towards the crest of the ravine wall. The whole river was pouring upwards into square segments, gradually assembled into wider sections.

‘They’re making a bridge,’ voxed Valqash. ‘Captain, the necrons are making a bridge to cross. They’ll be at the other side before us.’

Valqash didn’t need to say it would mean the Astral Knights were trapped. The plan to evade the necron column marching after them had led to the whole strikeforce being stranded at the bottom of a ravine with necrons on both sides. There was no worse position to get caught in.

The bridge was forming slab by slab, already stretching partway across the ravine.

‘Squads Belphegar and Sehellan!’ voxed Captain Khabyar. ‘Set up across the river! Get fire on the bridge! Kypsalah, take the tactical units and secure that structure!’

‘The temple, captain?’ voxed Valqash. ‘It could be a key objective for the necrons. It may not be the best place to make a stand. If it is a religious site for them the lord of Borsis might throw everything they have at us there.’

‘It’s also the only defensible structure in this hole,’ retorted Khabyar. ‘We take it and defend it. Those are my orders.’

The strikeforce picked up speed and began to ford the river. The quicksilver rushed around fallen chunks of corroded debris, making for poor footing. The Devastator squads manhandled their heavy weapons across to set up on the opposite shore. The Scouts were already finding the surest routes towards the silver temple hallway up the ravine wall.

Valqash knew better than to argue with Captain Khabyar on a hunch, but every thought he had about the temple was one of foreboding. As a psyker, he had learned to trust those instincts. At the very least he could get there first and assess the risks for himself.

Valqash broke away from the squads moving beside him and hurried as fast as he could across the river. He was sure he could see faces in the water as it rushed past and spat fat globules into the air. The bridge was half-completed overhead.

The ancient rusted bodies of necrons were buried in the corrosion of the far ravine wall, discarded and abandoned. Valqash found himself wondering how long Borsis had been drifting through the galaxy. What had humankind achieved when Borsis was first forged and the necrons first staked their claim there? Had they left Terra in the first days of the Scattering? Did humanity even exist?

Sergeant Kypsalah's squad was furthest ahead and had reached the approach to the temple. The closer Valqash got the vaster the temple seemed, and the brighter among the corrosion of this district. If the necron shells buried in the canyon wall were ancient, the temple must have been just as old, but it looked like it had been built the day before.

'Then we shall fight here after all, Librarian!' exclaimed Sergeant Kypsalah as Valqash clambered towards him. Kypsalah's squad was made up of the few surviving veterans of the Sixth Company, equipped with a mix of weapons and armour marks. Seeing the patchwork nature of the squad brought home the severity of the losses the Astral Knights had already suffered on Borsis. 'We could have saved us all a lot of walking if we had decided to fight up there.'

Missile fire streaked up from the Devastator squads below into the half-assembled bridge. Some missiles flew wide but several hit and orange blossoms of fire erupted in the air. Fragments of metal fell, mingling with the rain that still drizzled down from the darkened sky. A few of the necrons with the anti-gravity chassis were flying across already, the vanguard of the column. A host of scarabs accompanied them like a swarm of metal locusts.

'Let us see what we are dealing with, brothers,' said Valqash. 'I would see inside the temple before I rely on it to...'

Valqash felt a vibration through his feet. Something was rumbling deep inside the canyon wall. It could be an earthquake, it could be a necron weapon or an ancient machine starting up.

'Borsis has noticed we are here,' said Kypsalah. 'If you can tell what lies in our future, Codicier, we'd all be grateful.'

'Forgive me, but the arts of divination are beyond me. Mine is a more direct application of the mind.'

'Then I hope you have some use.'

Valqash assumed Kypsalah was joking and followed the squad as it approached the first step of the temple's foundations, almost three metres high as if built for a race of giants. The canyon shuddered again and loose debris rolled down the canyon wall. Valqash noticed a corroded necron skull bouncing past him.

Valqash clambered up onto the first step, and mounted the next. The squad followed him, covering one another as they moved forwards. The threshold of the temple was an immense rectangle of yawning darkness broken by silver pillars like the bars on a cage.

Valqash could just make out the shapes of statues inside, too far for the weak light to fully reach. He took cover behind a pillar to get a closer look as Kypsalah's squad trained their plasma guns and bolters into the darkness.

They were not statues. They were necron constructs, similar in proportion to the necron warriors but with bronze armour plating and tall halberds with blades of green crystal. And there were thousands of them, ranks upon ranks, stretching in perfect formation far into the darkness.

They looked different to the necrons the strikeforce had fought a running battle with since the crash. They were more ornate and their weapons looked more advanced than the gauss blasters carried by the warrior-constructs. Among them, further back in the shadows, Valqash could see raised litters each supporting a throne on which sat another construct, more ornate still with a grand headdress and a collar of mosaic panels. This force had its leaders, magnificent and enthroned. Valqash was reminded of the grand sarcophagi of certain savage races who buried thousands of statues alongside their kings, to serve them in the afterlife.

'Throne alive,' swore Kypsalah as he joined Valqash by the pillar. 'How many are there?'

‘An army,’ said Valqash. ‘But they sleep. And we cannot risk waking them.’ He switched to the command vox-channel. ‘Captain, we cannot hold the temple. It is full of necron constructs. If they awake, we will face two armies.’

‘Received,’ came the vox-reply from Captain Khabyar.

‘Their world is invaded,’ said Sergeant Kypsalah. ‘And we have reached the very threshold of this temple. Why do they still sleep?’

‘Sacred ground,’ said Valqash. ‘Whatever they are guarding, it is more important than anything else on Borsis.’

The ground shook again. Debris clattered over the pediment of the temple and scattered across the steps.

‘We need to fall back,’ said Valqash. ‘We will fight on the slope of the ravine, not here. Our brothers will need our help.’

As Kypsalah led his squad back from the threshold of the temple, the side of the ravine heaved and a landslide of corroded metal rumbled down on the far side of the temple entrance. Something huge thumped against the inside of the ravine wall, like a buried animal trying to batter its way out.

Overhead the bridge was complete. The necron warriors were marching across, accompanied by their walking war machines and the anti-grav chariots of their commanders. Fire from the Devastator squads blew sections from the bridge but the scarabs repaired the damage almost before the few shattered necron warriors hit the river. The ranks of necron warriors were already assembling on the far side of the canyon and once they were in position, they would march down both sides to trap the Astral Knights in the open at the canyon’s lowest point. It was difficult to imagine a worse tactical position.

The side of the canyon heaved again. Valqash ran for the most secure-looking ground, a protruding slab of pitted steel. If he was going to die here it would be in combat with the necrons, not buried by an earthquake.

A section of the wall fell in a few metres from Valqash. Kypsalah’s veteran squad scattered to keep from being sucked into the widening hole. Valqash dropped to one knee and instinctively drew his force axe. His mind tuned into the weapon’s psychic circuit and he felt the axe as an extension of his body.

He had learned to trust his instincts. They had come to him since he had been a child, when his family had brought him in secret to the witch-seers of the lowest castes so he could be exorcised and cured. But it had not worked. The seers were charlatans who dealt in parlour tricks and theatrics. When they realised Valqash’s instincts were the symptom of a greater power, they had been terrified. He had known when things were going to happen – especially bad things. His family had been pardoned for concealing him from the grey-faced men who enforced Imperial law, in return for bringing him before the Chaplains of the Astral Knights.

A great dark shape heaved up from the sinkhole. It let out a metallic roar as a rust-covered arm reached out, its jagged fingers groping. It was enormous, three times the height of a Space Marine. Its details were obscured by the encrustation of corrosion but beneath Valqash could make out joints and surfaces of pitted steel.

The hand grabbed the edge of the slab on which Valqash was standing. Valqash saw its segments were made up of the torsos of necron warrior-constructs, with components of limbs and necron skulls forming the joints. It was the necron equivalent of the walking dead, a golem of corpses torn to pieces and welded together in a haphazard monstrosity. Its head emerged next, a mass of necron body segments with a massive undershot jaw and a single off-centre eye sunk into the metal. Its other arm tore from the canyon wall – it had no hand, just a cannon with a huge bore surrounded by clusters of the same glowing green rods that fuelled the gauss weapons carried by the necron warriors.

Valqash’s instincts were crying out now. They were a voice in his head, not one that formed words but that held up concepts and alerts in front of his mind’s eye. By the Codex he should defer to Kypsalah, the veteran, or to Khabyar, the commanding officer. But the Astral Knights had sought him out because of the power of his mind, and that was a weapon he had a duty to

use as best he could.

That instinct was that the enemy was above him, not beside him.

‘What are you?’ yelled Valqash.

The steel hulk raised its head to the sky and bellowed. The sound shook the whole canyon. More corroded, long-deactivated necrons tumbled from the tear in the surface of Borsis. The rods around the cannon glowed bright and raw power gathered in the barrel.

‘Bring it down!’ voxed Kypsalah.

‘Hold fire, brothers!’ retorted Valqash. ‘To the necrons this thing is an abomination. It is a blasphemy we can use!’

‘It is about to open fire!’ voxed Kypsalah. Valqash could see the veteran squad lining up ready to fire from the slope below.

‘If you ever trust a battle-brother,’ said Valqash, ‘trust me now. Hyalhi spoke of an ally on Borsis. Sarakos spoke of one who seeks our help. Trust me now and hold fire!’

Kypsalah held up a fist to rescind the order he had given a moment earlier. His squad’s fingers hovered over their triggers.

The hulk hauled its body out of the hole. It was entirely composed of discarded necron bodies. Its exposed spine was a row of ribcages and pelvises. The joint at its waist rolled on bearings of necron skulls, the rust on them ground off as the hulk moved. It aimed its cannon up into the sky and fired a great blast of shimmering green energy with a sound like reality tearing open.

A section of the bridge vanished in an eruption of greenish flame. One of the striding war machines found itself without a bridge under its feet and it tumbled, bringing half a dozen necron warriors with it, to plunge into the silver waters.

‘This thing had better stay on our side,’ voxed Kypsalah.

The hulk clambered down the side of the canyon. Its cannon was dark now as it recharged. It held out a hand over the rushing metallic waters and a host of tiny scarabs emerged from the joints of its body, scurrying over it like insects over a corpse. A trickle of them jumped from the hulk’s outstretched fingers into the river.

Valqash could feel the information flickering through the air. Geometric shapes appeared in the metallic flow of the river, to dissolve again and reform. The air felt thick and greasy and sparks earthed from the armour of the Astral Knights into the corroded ground.

‘Devastators, hold fire!’ ordered Captain Khabyar.

Valqash saw now what Khabyar had. Sections of the bridge were disappearing. They melted into globes of mercury that mingled with the filthy rain as they fell.

The hulk raised its hand and brought it down suddenly. The bridge dissolved away faster. The necron column shifted to keep the bridge under their feet but they were rapidly running out of space.

‘Take cover!’ ordered Khabyar. ‘Fire zones all directions! They will come down right on top of us!’

Khabyar was right. A long section of the bridge vanished as the hulk let out a triumphant roar. Scores of necrons were falling now. The first of them landed in the river or against the canyon floor. One hit near Valqash and was dashed to pieces. As he watched, its components scrabbled back together and it rose again, lopsided and dented but still wielding its gauss blaster.

Valqash fired a close group of bolt pistol shots into its chest. Its torso was blown open and it fell back, but more were landing. Some of them lay where they fell but others self-repaired and rose stutteringly to their feet.

Each group of Astral Knights gathered to form a firebase, a knot of battle-brothers covering all directions. Valqash slid down the steep slope to join Kypsalah’s squad. A warrior lurched at him – its gauss blaster was wrecked but the blade mounted on the end of the barrel was still keen. Valqash hacked at it with his force axe and let a sliver of his psychic power run through the blade to its edge. The enhanced blade sliced through the necron’s neck and its head came away cleanly.

Necrons marched from every side. Kypsalah’s squad kept their discipline, firing short bursts of

well-placed bolts of plasma to cut down the advancing constructs with efficiency and speed. Across the valley the other Astral Knights were doing the same, formed up to protect their heavy weapons as they blazed bolter fire in precise volleys to shred the necrons. The necrons, on the other hand, landed in twos and threes, unable to adopt a formation before being caught in the overlapping fire zones.

The Astral Knights might just survive. And even as Valqash chastised himself for daring to have such a thought, the waters of the river heaved up and the fallen walker emerged from it right beside Kypsalah's squad, silver streaking down its carapace. Although one leg was halfway buckled underneath it, it had clearly survived the fall fully mobile and combat-able. The gun mounted under its hull swivelled through the heat haze rolling off it. Its hull was covered in lenses and focusing arrays that cast rays of reddish light across Kypsalah's veterans.

Gunfire stuttered against it. The damage was nothing more than cosmetic. The metal of the walker's hull flowed up into the bullet scars and filled in the wounds. The mounted gun took aim at the veteran squad and a bolt of pure heat ripped through the air, visible as a white-hot haze connecting the gun's barrel with the closest of the squad.

The Astral Knight caught in the heat beam simply dissolved. The ceramite of his armour reached melting point and evaporated, taking with it everything inside. The beam played through the squad, gouging a deep cherry-red furrow of molten steel into the ground as it did so. The hiss of the superheated air rose to a high scream. The squad scattered out of the way, but they were not all fast enough. One lost his trailing leg to the beam as he dived away from it. Another lost his gun arm and most of his shoulder. Kypsalah fired as he ran, spraying bolter fire at the targeting lenses that whirled as they sought out the next enemy.

Valqash shouldered his force axe and holstered his pistol. They would not do him any good here.

He held out both hands in front of him. It was not a necessary gesture but it helped him focus, the muscle memory aiding the pathways through his brain that opened up. He normally kept those parts of his brain locked in by the iron discipline taught by the Astral Knights Librarium, because there he kept the weapon.

Crimson energy formed around his hands. He formed the image in his mind a moment before it became a reality – a stream of psychic power ripping from his palms into the walker. It was a constant and cohesive stream of energy that lanced deep into the living metal of the walker's hull. Valqash fought to focus it, for the tighter the beam the deeper it penetrated. He felt the resistance of the walker's inner structure and pushed on through, feeling his twin hearts hammering with the strain.

Some Space Marine Librarians could banish their opponents to another dimension or quicken the metabolisms of their battle-brothers. Others could surround their fists with gauntlets of molten stone or fill their enemies' minds with terrifying hallucinations. And some, like Valqash, were nothing more or less than living artillery.

The walker reeled, trying to force its hull out of the beam. All it achieved was to let the beam play across its surface, carving a deep canyon in the living metal. Lenses popped and sparks spurted from the open wound in its hull like burning blood. The heat ray swung away, catching a necron warrior in its path and vaporising the construct from the waist up.

Valqash felt the tightness rising in his chest and the constriction of his lungs. He had learned the hard way during his apprenticeship as an Epistolary in the Librarium that his mind could channel power his body could not contain. He shut down the stream of psychic energy and felt the coldness of his mental pathways closing down again. He coughed out a lungful of smoke, and more smoke coiled from his palms. The paint on his gauntlets was bubbling and hissing.

'Now!' shouted Valqash, coughing again. 'Strike!'

Kypsalah's squad turned and concentrated fire on the rent in the walker's hull. Bolter fire pinged off sections of its hull armour, revealing the interweaving pipework and mechanical members inside. A blast from one of the squad's plasma guns bored through a key piston and the walker sagged down as one of its legs was suddenly paralysed.

Kypsalah ran forwards and vaulted up onto the walker. He rammed his chainsword into the

tear in the hull and wrenched it back and forth. Sparks and components spat back at him. The walker bucked suddenly and Kypsalah was thrown into the metallic river. The quicksilver rushed over him, threatening to submerge him as the walker raised a functional leg over the first sergeant to stamp it down and impale him.

Valqash called on his mental energy again but for the moment it was exhausted. In reality there was an infinite ocean of power in the warp, the parallel dimension where all psychic potential resided, but he had trained his body and mind to close the connection to the warp down when his body was still unable to channel it again. For the moment his mind was like a bolter without any shells, waiting to be reloaded.

There was nothing he could do. Kypsalah would die.

With a sound of tearing metal the necron hulk slammed into the side of the walker, barging it aside into the river. The paralysed leg crunched and folded underneath it. The hulk drew its fist back and pounded a massive blow into the walker, splitting its hull apart along the wound Valqash had opened. The walker's remaining good leg waved like that of a pinned insect. One of the veteran squad waded into the quicksilver and levelled his plasma gun at the exposed metallic entrails of the walker. The plasma blast ripped a smoking black hole right through the vulnerable innards and the walker slumped to inaction. The quicksilver swamped it and began to drag it downstream as the hulk lumbered back to shore.

Sergeant Kypsalah grabbed the hand of the veteran with the plasma gun, who pulled him out of the torrent and back to the shore. Valqash drew back to the squad as it regrouped and tried to take stock of the battle. It was chaotic, with no battle lines – isolated groups of necrons formed up and charged the Astral Knights, to be cut down with bolter fire. Valqash saw Captain Khabyar lead a counter-charge against a larger group of necron warriors, scattering the constructs as he laid about him with swingeing blows of his power fist.

'Form up!' ordered Khabyar. 'To me, brothers, and form the line! We fight not like bands of brigands! We are Astral Knights! Obey your Codex and fight like Space Marines!'

The Astral Knights had opened up enough manoeuvring room around them to form the semblance of a battle line, with the bulk of the fallen necrons on one side. Valqash joined the veteran squad as they took their place in the line between two Devastator squads.

Necrons had fallen in their hundreds. When they self-repaired there was no shortage of bolters to shoot them down again. The shattered components mingled with the ancient discarded body parts that littered the canyon floor. Some of the fallen necrons vanished as if whisked away by some teleporter technology – others were carried away by the quicksilver river.

With the river between the Astral Knights line and the bulk of the necrons, the necrons had to wade through it to get into range. Their command over the metal river had evidently been usurped by the appearance of the hulk. As they made their way towards the line the Devastator squads used the greater range of their missile launchers and heavy bolters to reap a terrible toll among the constructs. Some stood again to be shot down by bolter fire as they got nearer. Others vanished below the quicksilver and never re-emerged.

Some of the necron leaders had made it down on their anti-grav thrones. The thrones were armed with mounted cannon and in a straight-up battle would have been a formidable addition to the necron firepower, but isolated and without the massed ranks of constructs beneath them the aristocrats riding them dared not approach within missile launcher range of the Astral Knights. One sought to form a wedge of warrior-constructs around it and forge across the river, gathering the remaining strength of numbers to strike the Astral Knights line. Valqash stepped forwards from the line and allowed his mind to open up the old channels, and let a beam of power leap from his hands to the necron enthroned on its chariot. He felt the power trying to break free from him and tightened his mind around it, keeping it from bucking and lashing out around him at random. It served him, it was his to control, and he commanded it to focus on his target.

The beam went wide by a metre, slicing off a chunk of the vehicle's structure. It carved through one of the anti-grav units and the chariot dipped sideways into the river, the aristocrat on board

clambering onto its upper side in a manner less than dignified. It must have given a silent order to the constructs around it for they backed away from the Astral Knights, surrounding the aristocrat and escorting it to the relative safety of the canyon's far side.

The Astral Knights kept up their fire, driving the necrons back. The column was utterly shattered by now, with the intact elements gathering at the top of the ridge to regroup and find another crossing. The necrons were shot down as they tried to withdraw, raked by Devastator fire as they marched up the winding paths back to the top.

Valqash stepped back from the front line. The necrons were out of his power's range for now. He walked past the Devastator squad beside him towards where the steel hulk crouched at one end of the Astral Knights line. It had lent its cannon fire to the Devastators and the barrel was glowing hot.

'I asked you before,' said Valqash, 'and I will do so again. What are you?'

The hulk turned its massive rusted head towards Valqash and a set of lenses deep inside its eye socket spun as they focused on him.

'Turakhin,' it said.

In a once-grand forum the strikeforce paused for Captain Khabyar to confer with Chapter Master Amhrad, and for the Scouts to range ahead and find a path. The force had moved out of the band of rain and now a cold, sullen breeze whistled across the expanse of metal paving slabs and the columns of the temples and basilicae making up each side of the open ground.

'I would not have chosen this body,' said Turakhin as he settled into the doorway of a grand basilica, where he could not be seen by airborne necron eyes. 'But we do not always have choice in such things. Before the traitor Heqiroth made his play for my throne, I anticipated a noble of Borsis would seek to rise up against me. I even entertained the possibility one of them would succeed. I placed host bodies across Borsis so my consciousness might enter one of them should my regal body be damaged or imprisoned. When I was freed, I waited until your kind came close enough to one such body for me to make contact. Alas, it was this body, this panoply of rusting corpses.'

'What did Heqiroth do to you?' asked Valqash. By silent agreement, Valqash had become the spokesman for the strikeforce when dealing with the creature that called itself Turakhin – a being that, if it told the truth, had once been the lord of all Borsis.

'He severed my consciousness from my body,' replied Turakhin, 'and imprisoned it in his tesseract labyrinth. It is a dungeon reserved only for the most dangerous of entities. I did not know Heqiroth had access to such a thing. Perhaps I would have laid my plans differently if I had.'

'You have no love for Heqiroth.'

'I have nothing but hate,' said Turakhin. 'And all of it is directed towards the usurper Heqiroth and his dynasty.'

'Then we have something in common,' said Valqash.

'So I surmised. And that is why I presented myself to you.'

Valqash tried to read some expression or body language from Turakhin but the rusted shell gave away nothing. It was the first time he knew of that an Astral Knight had spoken with one of the necrons. He had not even been certain they could be communicated with, though the fragmented vox-messages from the failed assassination mission had suggested Heqiroth used the human tongue to control the mind-wiped slaves. Contact with the enemy, especially with the alien, was proscribed by all Imperial authorities, and the Codex Astartes made it clear that through their words the xenos sought to beguile and misinform. It was little wonder that no other Astral Knight had been eager to speak with Turakhin. None of them relished the risk of moral threat that came via the words of the alien.

'Heqiroth will never negotiate,' said Turakhin, 'even unto his destruction. He is a fanatic. For what purpose he commands Borsis I do not know, but he will never give it up. He does not understand that the nature of rulership is compromise. I do understand that, for my dynasty had ruled Borsis since we first awoke in its vaults. I can negotiate. I will.'

‘What can you offer us?’ asked Valqash.

‘I will speak of that directly with your Chapter Master,’ said Turakhin. ‘This one named Amhrad. I have monitored your communications and I know only he has the authority to deal. But I can give you an end to the threat Borsis presents to your Imperium. That is what you seek and it is within your grasp. I ask for little in return, and certainly nothing you will be unwilling to grant. But this I will discuss further with Amhrad.’

‘We can gain you an audience with him,’ said Valqash. ‘It must be by vox, for Amhrad is halfway across this planet fighting his own battles. But you will have your chance to parley. There is one question I would have answered, though, before you do so.’

‘Then ask it.’

‘The temple in the canyon,’ said Valqash. ‘The one beside the place you stored your body. It was guarded by an army of necrons, and though we forced back the army pursuing us the temple guardians did not emerge to help them. What are they guarding that is so important they watched us inflict a great defeat on their own kind, rather than leave their post?’

‘An ancient religion,’ said Turakhin, ‘from before the time we killed our gods. The guardians are cursed to live on in that time. They do not see what lies before them, only the universe as it was when they took up their vigil. They are a relic of our distant history. What they guard has been gone for so long, none can say for sure what it ever was.’

Valqash’s psychic abilities did not extend to the reading of minds. Perhaps even if they had, he would have been unable to glean anything from the alien, technological mind of Turakhin. There was no way of knowing how much of what the necron said was the truth. Perhaps it did not matter. If Turakhin offered the only possibility of victory left on Borsis, there was no choice for the Astral Knights but to take it.

‘Lord Turakhin,’ said Valqash, ‘again I must ask a direct question. Can you deliver us Borsis? You alone, and with no more than the martial strength of the Astral Knights who remain?’

‘That depends,’ said Turakhin.

‘On what?’

Valqash had the impression that if Turakhin could have smiled, he would have. ‘On what you are willing to sacrifice.’



*His Imperial Majesty's ship Needlefang
Varv Deliverance Mission*

**Command clearance only
From the Scrivener Choir of Lord Inquisitor Rhaye
Thought For The Day: The True Battle Never Ends. The True Peace Never
Begins.**

Moral Hygiene With Regards To Compromised Survivors

Brethren in service,

The elimination of the potential for moral threats is the most crucial duty a crewman of the Varv Deliverance Mission can fulfil. Our minds are the gateway through which the Enemy will enter our midst. Guard your mind, and guard the minds of those unable to do so themselves.

Sometimes we must take on tasks that, to the benighted and ignorant, are repugnant. Some would use words such as 'evil' or 'cruel'. This is the vocabulary of the damned. It is crueller by far, and infinitely more evil, to allow those ill-favoured by fate to continue to exist as threats to all. This is the principle by which the Holy Ordos of the Inquisition have functioned for thousands of years, and the principle that must be accepted by all who wish to do their duty to the Emperor and His Imperium of Man.

All contacts with survivors of the engagements of the Varv Deliverance Mission must be reported to the relevant command authority. Sufficient authorities are a shipmaster, commissar, regimental commander or a representative of the Holy Ordos.

Survivors are to be considered moral threats until demonstrated otherwise. Communication is not to be engaged in without orders from a command authority.

Independent action by a survivor is to be met with containment. If containment is not possible, neutralisation is to be considered authorised and required.

All ships and military units are to maintain a detail of able and armed men, sanctioned as morally competent by a command authority, to execute the neutralisation of survivors who are demonstrated to be a moral threat or who cannot be demonstrated as otherwise.

All ships and military units are to maintain a detail of able men to dispose of the corpses of individuals neutralised as potential moral threats. This duty must be performed expediently, efficiently and with minimum impact on morale. Incineration is deemed acceptable. Voiding remains from an airlock without prior dismemberment is not sufficient.

Hallucinations, vivid dreams and other intrusive mental imagery are to be reported to a command authority. The specific imagery to be monitored for includes: any image of a face, human or xenos, with three or more eyes; the sensation of existing within a star; sympathy for or identification with the xenos species colloquially referred to as 'necrons'; antipathy towards or inclination to act against the instructions of a command authority or a representative of the Inquisition. Anyone reporting such intrusive imagery is to report to the Armed Explorator Craft Needlefang under guard.

Failure to act in accordance with these standing orders is sufficient cause to deem an individual as presenting a moral threat.

In the name of the Holy Ordos of the Emperor's Inquisition.

– Lord Inquisitor Quilven Rhaye.



SIX

Chief Librarian Hyalhi

‘He lies, Lord Amhrad,’ said Hyalhi.

‘Did your psychic senses tell you that?’ asked Amhrad. His voice was clear enough now over the vox – getting the higher ground had improved the integrity of the vox-net.

‘No,’ replied Hyalhi. ‘It is just obvious.’

Hyalhi and his honour guard had reached the upper levels of a belfry or watchtower atop a building shaped something like a church. The building stood on a low rise among the maze of many-levelled structures that took up this district of Borsis. They resembled residential buildings, albeit on a larger scale, though there was no sign of anyone living there. It was possible they were slave quarters recently evacuated, though if that was the case the slaves had left no sign of their existence. The squad stood at guard as Hyalhi conferred with the Chapter Master over the command channel. They were lacking one of their number, Brother Ghazin, who had fallen during the expedition into the reclamation vault.

‘I shall soon speak with our new friend Turakhin,’ said Amhrad. ‘I cannot say what his offer will be or whether we can accept it, but I have every intention of arming myself with all the information on this alien that I can. I entrust you with this, Chief Librarian. Again I ask much of you.’

‘Again, I give thanks that I may do my duty,’ said Hyalhi.

‘So the Codex would have you say,’ said Amhrad, ‘but I know our brethren are embattled and any Astral Knight would rather go to their aid than run errands I set for him. But that is what you must do. The slaves indicate that Turakhin’s rule was conducted from the palace of the Magadha dynasty. The place is proscribed now and Heqiroth permits no necron to set foot there. If there is intelligence on Turakhin at the palace, I would have it before I begin negotiations with him. At the very least I may be able to trap him in a lie, and reveal if he is deceiving us.’

‘The slaves were compromised,’ said Hyalhi. ‘Is it possible they are feeding us information planted by Heqiroth?’

‘It is,’ said Amhrad. ‘That is why I am sending you, Chief Librarian. If any Astral Knight can see a trap coming, it is you.’

‘Can you spare the *Maxentius* to transport us?’

‘It is on its way now. Fear not, Chief Librarian. We can survive awhile without you.’

Hyalhi walked to the edge of the belfry, where a wide window looked out across the district. The Astral Knights force led by Amhrad included the Seventh Company and stragglers separated from their own companies by the chaos of the crash. Amhrad’s force was still the closest to the crash site of the *Tempestus* and the column of smoke could be seen rising among the spires and minarets on the horizon. The squads of the Seventh were scattered across the area, each forging ahead through the cramped streets. A faint glitter of light catching steel suggested the necrons moving after them, closing in on the district in their thousands. Amhrad was keeping his strikeforce fluid and manoeuvrable, but there were only so many numbers that squad tactics could negate.

Perhaps Amhrad would survive here until Hyalhi returned. Perhaps not. That risk was one

Amhrad had taken into account and considered acceptable.

‘Then the Emperor lead you, Lord Amhrad,’ said Hyalhi.

‘Emperor lead you,’ said Amhrad. ‘And lead us, Hyalhi, in turn.’

Darkness lay across the seven hills as if night had pooled on the surface of Borsis. Though the sun of the Varv system was still visible as a dirty glow through the streaky iron-coloured cloud, the palaces seemed to rise through the night sky on the opposite side of the planetoid.

The Magadha dynasty had been built on antiquity and wealth. Whatever the necrons considered valuable, the Magadha had possessed the most of it. A circle of slender gilded towers ringed the seven hills on which the palace was built, forming a border between the dynasty’s overt opulence and the drab steel of the surrounding area. Each wing of the palace was built on one of the hills, connected to its neighbours by bridges hung with chains of gemstones and precious metals.

The palace was untouched. Time had dulled its silver and tarnished its gold, but it had not fallen to corrosion and collapse as other abandoned areas had. Even the rust seemed to obey Heqiroth’s proscribing of the place. The palace looked less abandoned and more frozen in darkness, cursed and forbidden.

‘There,’ said Hyalhi, leaning over the shoulder of the gunship pilot Brother Kodelos. ‘The south-western wing. Turakhin’s chambers. Take us in low and circle before we land.’

Kodelos worked the controls of the gunship *Maxentius* and it ducked beneath the level of the palace towers, levelling out to swing around the south-western wing. The wing was an eight-sided building of countless complex angles and facets, forming an interlocking geometry picked out in silver and red gold.

‘Looks clear,’ said Kodelos. ‘There’s nothing moving down there.’

‘Take us down by the southern entrance,’ said Hyalhi. ‘Stay above us. Be vigilant.’

The *Maxentius* drifted down towards the entrance, the superheated exhausts kicking up clouds of iron filings. The rear ramp swung open and Hyalhi’s honour guard jumped out, bolters up, ready to shoot down any necron constructs that might lurch at them from the shadows gathering around the palace.

Hyalhi was last out. Above him rose the entrance to the south-western wing, a massive set of double doors inlaid with images of the Magadha dynasty’s lords. Borsis itself was in the centre, ringed by the dynasts who had ruled it.

‘Open them,’ said Hyalhi.

Burhan stood ready with his flamer as the rest of the squad hauled the doors open.

The darkness inside did not leap at them. The palace was silent.

Hyalhi stepped up to the threshold. He felt the serpent inside his mind straining to uncoil. It was dangerous to give it too much freedom, but equally dangerous to ignore it.

‘Spread out,’ ordered Hyalhi. ‘Sweep and secure.’

The serpent rattled around again inside his head. He let it uncoil, just a little. He could not give it free rein, not here in a place so heavy with unknown history. His senses bled out and edged the ornate interior of the palace in unnatural colours, the light of the warp shining through from the other side of reality.

History was heavy. The burden of its impact on the warp weighed down the substance of real space. Hyalhi had to force his senses through it, like wading through sucking mud. But through the murk, Hyalhi could see the threads hanging behind everything.

Fate tied the galaxy together, and fate was a tapestry of everything that would one day happen. No one could read that tapestry, no matter how insane warp-prophets or the farseers of the alien eldar might claim to know the future. Only individual threads could be perceived, and the way they entwined with the threads beside them.

One thread wound around a single necron who sat enthroned deeper into the palace. He wore the accoutrements of the Magadha dynasty, familiar from the images on the palace doors and the pictograms lining the walls. Behind the necron stretched the echoes of past dynasts, similar in shape but flesh and blood instead of the living metal of the tech-constructs. Their

faces were hazy, clouded by time and the imperfection of memory. Hyalhi had the impression of greyish, lesioned flesh and a twisted and hunched body shape, echoed in the form of a necron warrior. They were skeletal and hideous, compensating for their living decay with the gold and finery of rulership.

And they were suffused with death. Every thread wrapped around the necron dynasties of the past led towards death. Even while they lived, it was death that had obsessed and consumed them.

Hyalhi knew when he was standing at a nexus of history. The past and the future of Borsis ran through the south-western wing of the Magadha palace.

‘Onward,’ said Hyalhi. ‘Be alert. This is a place of death.’

The squad fanned out to scout the immediate surroundings. The south-western wing was built around a central temple, not to the gods this necron world hinted at, but to Turakhin himself. Adjoining chambers held a mechanical cradle into which a necron tech-construct could be plugged, perhaps to recharge or self-repair, and what resembled a library of thousands of panes of crystal held racked up on the walls. Side chambers were set up for negotiations – in one was a grand table of steel and obsidian with a map of Borsis, the sections of its cityscape rendered in silver and gold. Strategic locations were marked with precious stones.

‘Pict-steal that,’ said Hyalhi.

‘Already done,’ replied Apothecary Saahr, who was poring over the map.

‘There’s nothing here,’ said Brother Felhidar.

‘Nothing visible,’ corrected Hyalhi. He returned to the temple. The face of a necron, presumably Turakhin in the body he had inhabited prior to being usurped, glared down from one wall. It was rendered in polished grey stone and was fully the height of the room. An altar before it held a heap of small precious metal cubes left as an offering. Perhaps Turakhin had left them as a sacrifice to himself. It would seem a very necron thing to do.

Hyalhi knelt. He removed the gauntlet of his power armour and placed his bare palm against the ground. The patterns of the floor echoed the intricate shapes of Borsis’s cityscapes as seen from the gunship.

Hyalhi could feel what had happened there. Betrayal. A confluence of power. He could feel the arrogance of Turakhin, and the shattering of it by Heqiroth’s coup. And beyond it, far in the past, another betrayal. Something awesome in scope, the betrayal of an entire species.

They killed their gods. It was the only clue the Astral Knights had about the distant history of the necron race. What Hyalhi felt was an echo of deicide.

He caught the skittering vibrations of insect legs on the floor. A necron scarab crawled along the base of the shrine room’s wall. Hyalhi picked up it with his bare hand and held it in front of its face. It was no bigger than the roaches that were such a problem on every Imperial battleship. Its tiny legs wriggled as it twisted in his grasp to get free.

Hyalhi placed the scarab carefully on the floor by his feet. It scurried away and Hyalhi followed it. It passed through a small side door into what Hyalhi had assumed was a vestment chamber or storage room for sacred implements. Hyalhi followed it and saw the room was a narrow, low corridor, one which would have forced even a human of normal size to duck. Hyalhi could barely squeeze his armoured shape through it.

Other scarabs clung to the walls. They joined the lone scarab as it moved, forming a mobile patch of glittering metal. Hyalhi followed as his shoulder guards and psychic hood scraped along the passageway.

The passageway ended at a small room with a necron cradle mounted on each wall, roughly humanoid depressions hung with cabling and studded with spikes that looked like they fitted into ports on a tech-construct’s body. Quarters for palace functionaries, perhaps, or even backup bodies for Turakhin to use should his regular body fall to violence. If so, he had been too slow to use them when Heqiroth made his move.

Hyalhi could feel a force pulling at his mind. It was not another psychic being – he had stayed alert for any hint of another psyker on Borsis and had felt nothing, and any xenos witch would have stood out like a flaming beacon to Hyalhi’s psychic senses. But it was a will powerful

enough to register in Hyalhi's mind even without any psychic ability. It was drawing him in, but he was at a dead end. Hyalhi was supposed to forge deeper into the palace. There had to be a way in.

'Brother Saahr,' voxed Hyalhi.

'Chief Librarian, where are you?' came the reply.

'Take two brothers. Find three necron bodies. Salvage is acceptable but they must be mostly intact. Bring them to the shrine chamber. And be quick.'

Hyalhi's honour guard had long been used to obeying his orders without asking why they were given. Hyalhi kept his own counsel, and it was said among the battle-brothers that Amhrad was the only man with whom he spoke as an equal. They were right, too, not because Hyalhi thought of the other Astral Knights as beneath him but because a Librarian had to stay a mystery. His powers were a potent weapon, but they were also as dangerous to the user and those around him as they were to any enemy without the relentless mental discipline the Chapter Librarium had taught. The battle-brothers had to remain apprehensive about all witches, they had to see them as different and sinister. A psyker was the most dangerous creature that could exist in the galaxy, and it took a psyker to understand that.

Saahr did not question as he, Burhan and Masadh returned less than an hour later, each carrying an inactive necron construct. One was relatively new, stained but not corroded with time. The other two were very old but intact, and the construct Burhan carried looked like one of the elites with massive shoulder guards and plates of tarnished gold armouring its torso.

Hyalhi directed the squad to take each necron corpse into the small chamber the scarabs had led him into. The scarabs were still there, gathered on the ceiling as if in anticipation of something.

'Speak, Brother Burhan,' said Hyalhi from within the corridor.

'I said nothing,' said Burhan.

'But you wish to,' replied Hyalhi.

Burhan heaved the necron off his shoulder. 'We are spending time following your hunch, Chief Librarian, time when our brothers are fighting and suffering. I believe only in what I see before me with my own eyes. That is what I wish to say. But you are my commander, and I am not a psyker, so I held my tongue.'

'That is why I asked for you to join my honour guard, brother,' said Hyalhi. 'If I followed every intuition blindly with no one voice to dissent, I would soon be lost in darkness.'

'Then you will listen to me?' asked Burhan.

'Not this time,' said Hyalhi. 'Continue.'

The Astral Knights heaved the necron corpses up into the cradles on the walls. Probes snicked into ports on the steel bodies and cabling retracted as the alcoves altered to accommodate the dimensions of the constructs. The necrons looked like nothing so much as metal skeletons nailed to the walls of a dungeon.

For a moment there was silence. The Astral Knights backed away from the walls as much as they could in the small room.

Ancient metal ground against metal inside the walls. Hyalhi caught the smell of rust and machine oil. The floor tilted and slid downwards, breaking up into segments that formed the steps of a staircase spiralling down. The walls hinged inwards, forming an archway over the newly formed stairway.

Burhan pointed the nozzle of his flamer into the darkness below. A faint glimmer pulsed along the walls, rippling along the lines of hieroglyphs carved into the metal. The air was hot and dry.

Hyalhi let his mind shimmer outwards, touching the veil that separated reality from the warp. It was there that the threads ran, criss-crossing the surface of time. The threads – not truly threads, that was just the concept that Hyalhi used to comprehend them – were the substance of fate. Few spoke of fate as anything but a metaphor or a curse, for in the minds of a non-psyker fate was something without meaning. They could not see or touch it, they could not read or follow it. At the most they might claim to believe in it, to absolve themselves of responsibility for their

lives.

But Hyalhi could see fate. It was not like looking at a painting or a holo of an event. Just looking at fate changed it. It was art, not science, and needed imagination instead of perception. Imagination was not a trait common to Space Marines. The way Hyalhi's mind worked was at odds with the way a Space Marine's should, which was why men like him were so rare. That Hyalhi's mind contained so much strangeness, but that he could still serve as an Astral Knight, was a testament to the discipline the Chapter Librarium had instilled in him.

Hyalhi picked out a single thread and followed it. Vibrations of victory, madness and uncertainty ran along it. It was a familiar thread, for it represented Hyalhi's own fate. It ran through the palace and down the staircase, where it became tinged with blood-red conflict and violence.

Other threads ran alongside it. One Hyalhi was sure represented Borsis itself, a cold and artificial thing, and he was more certain even than before that this was a synthetic planet created by an awesome power an aeon ago. Thousands more were almost invisible as if they barely registered on the face of the universe, shorn of some essence that allowed living things to make an impact on the veil – Hyalhi guessed these were individual necrons, perhaps the nobles who led the soulless masses of tech-construct warriors. They were tainted with sadness and regret, and the taste of treachery. What had happened to this artificial race? They had not always been that way. They were betrayed and they had lost their souls, and become the ancient machines that now ruled Borsis. Hyalhi could discern no details, except that it had happened on a vast scale and a very long time ago.

The Astral Knights were proud bright threads tangling with the necrons in a dense braid of impenetrable conflict. Each one plunged into the haze of the future. Sometimes Hyalhi could see a thread from beginning to end, and tell when a man had been born and where and how he would die. It was rare. The future unravelled everything – fate was a force, but it was mutable and uncertain, and most fates were not fixed enough to show where they ended. The Chapter and the necrons of Borsis followed theirs to an uncertain ending.

Hyalhi caught the sense of another thread, one that he had followed since the Astral Knights had first joined the Varv Deliverance Mission. It carried with it billions of souls, each one insignificant, but together making up a weight that scored a bright line across Hyalhi's psychic senses. It was the thread representing the fate of Varvenkast. In the past, not so long ago as the universe reckoned things, Varvenkast's fate had been changed with a sudden and awful certainty, a knot that dripped with malice and sorrow. In the near future Varvenkast collided with Borsis, and what happened afterwards was obscure. Hyalhi had followed this thread often enough. He let it pass. He knew how it ended, in that he could not know. Whatever the end entailed, it involved a greater magnitude of destruction than a human mind could encompass at once.

Fate ran down through the palace, and into whatever lay below. History had its own sensation, a taste of steel and blood, a touch like something electrified – these were the threads that determined the pattern of the galaxy, the crossroads where all outcomes were decided. The crossroads was below the Palace of the Magadha. Hyalhi could no more walk away from it than he could fly into the sky and through space.

Hyalhi reeled his mind back in. The structure of the palace fell into place around him, plunging through the weft of fate to form the outer walls, the innards, the narrow passageway and the flight of dark steps in front of him.

'Chief Librarian?' asked Apothecary Saahr. 'Your orders?'

'Down,' said Hyalhi.

It was a tomb, it was a temple, and it was a prison. The vast structure was embedded deep in the crust of Borsis, all black metal and polished stone-like surfaces riddled with glowing circuitry. The flight of steps opened up onto a circular walkway that ringed the inside of a titanic central chamber, the intricate angles of its construction forming a sphere of geometric shapes. It was big enough to have served as a hangar for an Imperial battleship, one of the ancient war

engines two kilometres long. A city could have hung within that space. A Space Marine's enhanced vision could reach all the way across. It was like a landscape without a horizon, disorienting and alien.

In the middle of the immense spherical chamber was a cube of necron steel. It was the size of the Astral Knights fortress-monastery that towered over Port Exalt on Obsidia. Patterns of light rippled over the xenos-forged metal. Around it hovered the faces of past lords of the Magadha dynasty, rendered in immense size as the necrons of Borsis chose to depict their rulers. They slowly orbited the cubic vault, their dead metal eyes endlessly scanning the walls. The gaze of one icon, that of a necron with no mouth-slit and a headdress that hung discs of engraved gold around its skull, seemed to pass over the Astral Knights emerging into the chamber from above.

'I give up,' said Brother Felhidar as he stepped out onto the walkway. 'Where are we?'

'A place that Heqiroth would surely have destroyed,' said Hyalhi, 'had he known of it. And a place of which Turakhin has neglected to inform us.'

'We know the necrons have a religion,' said Saahr. 'Or had one, at least. If they have a temple to anything but themselves, then this is it.'

'And yet,' said Hyalhi, 'they say they killed their gods.'

'Then this is the tomb of a god?' said Saahr.

'Perhaps.' Hyalhi held up a hand as if testing the direction of the wind, though the air here was still.

'Give me an enemy,' said Felhidar grimly. 'Give me a witch to imperil my soul or a beast to tear me asunder. But give me no more puzzles.'

Hyalhi stepped to the edge of the walkway. He estimated it was well over a kilometre down to the lowest point of the sphere, where a cluster of machines sent pulses of green light around their coils.

He stepped off the edge. The brothers of his honour guard could do nothing to stop him. The enormous necron face flew past him and he was in freefall.

He slowed and stopped. Hyalhi was hanging in midair, a few hundred metres below the cube. The anti-grav field created by the machine below, the same one that held up the necron icons and the cube itself, had caught him and buoyed him up.

'Please, Chief Librarian, tell us before you do things like that,' voxed Saahr. 'Not all of us can see the future.'

With a kick of his feet Hyalhi propelled himself upwards. He could feel now the sensation he had detected when he first set foot on Borsis, struggling from the ruins of the *Tempestus*. It was an underlying feeling, like the quiet note that ties together all the elements of a symphony. It was almost impossible to hear on its own and Hyalhi had lost it many times as he tried to read it, though he had been certain it was always there. Now it was louder and more concrete, and this close to the vault Hyalhi could pick it out and hold it firm.

It was a message. It was not a psychic communication – nothing native to Borsis was psychic, Hyalhi was certain of that. Instead it was the echo of a force of will that bent reality around it as a planet bent gravity, just perceptible to a psyker's mind. And like the gravity of a planet, weak though it might be, for it to have reached him at all indicated a truly immense presence. Hyalhi listened to the message, and heard what he had known he would hear.

Help.

'Burhan, Felhidar, join me,' voxed Hyalhi. 'The rest, cover us. I must get closer.'

The two Astral Knights jumped from the walkway and fell, caught a second later by the anti-grav field. A Space Marine was trained to function in zero gravity but it was still disorienting to have the ground beneath his feet one moment and to be floating freely the next. The two kicked their way closer to Hyalhi as Hyalhi rose further towards a necron icon circling over him.

Hyalhi grabbed the edge of the icon and kicked himself off its back surface towards the cube. The closer he got the more he could pick out the necron hieroglyphs formed by the energy running across its surface. They existed only for a moment before vanishing again to be replaced with more writing. Perhaps it was the history of whatever entity this place commemorated, a tract of philosophy, a eulogy, a curse against intruders. Hyalhi wished, not for

the first time, that one among the Astral Knights could read the hieroglyphics. The key to fighting the necrons lay deep in their history, the fathomless past where all the threads of their fate began.

Burhan and Felhidar reached the icon. Hyalhi was close enough to touch the surface of the enormous cube. He felt its power thrumming through the ceramite of his gauntlet.

‘Chief Librarian,’ voxed Saahr, ‘do you know what is inside?’

‘I will soon,’ replied Hyalhi.

The hieroglyphs squirmed around his hand. Bright lines of light radiated out, dividing the surface of the cube into sections. The sections shifted and angled outwards as the whole cube began to open up like a vast and intricate puzzle box. Hyalhi kicked himself clear as the cube opened up to reveal a gallery of painful bright light inside, a mass of chill fire. The temperature plummeted and Hyalhi felt beads of ice crystallising on the inside of his faceplate.

Hyalhi’s visual augmentations reacted to the light, shrinking his pupils to the size of pinpricks. The glare resolved into a mass of technology, crystals of glowing datamedium nestling among panes of squirming living metal. A host of bright silver scarabs scurried across the crystals, drawing the metal into long tendrils that waved out towards Hyalhi like the fronds of a sea anemone.

‘Get out,’ voxed Felhidar from behind Hyalhi. ‘Get out of there!’

‘Hold position, brothers,’ replied Hyalhi.

Fate looped around him as if its threads were seeking to tie him up and drag him towards his future whether Hyalhi wanted it or not. Everything ran through this place and time – Borsis, Varvenkast, the Astral Knights, and so much more only visible as vast continents of the future shifting dimly in the distance. Hyalhi held out his hands and let the living metal entwine them. The metal seeped in through the joints of his fingers and wrists, reaching like streams of ice up under his shoulder guards and across his chest. Hyalhi felt his lungs contract and his breath shorten.

The cold was profound. Hyalhi had fought in the vacuum of space and on worlds that had never seen a sun, but this chill pushed deeper through his body than that. He felt it injecting through the ports on the black carapace, the implant over his ribcage that allowed his power armour to interface with his body.

Then it reached his brain.

He could feel the tiny silver filaments worming across the inside of his skull. He could feel the alien thoughts crowding out his own, a jumble of chaotic information his human mind could not comprehend. For a moment he tried to force it out, for every psy-discipline session of his training had emphasised how he must protect the weapon of his mind with every moment. But Hyalhi forced down that instinct and let the alien in. He closed his eyes, and when he opened them they were blinded by a film of silver.

Hyalhi knew that where he stood was not real in the sense that it was not a physical place. It was, however, real in all the senses that really mattered. He could, for instance, die here.

It was likely that this place was, in fact, composed of data spread throughout the various systems of Borsis. It suited Hyalhi, however, to comprehend it as existing within the cubic vault, the innermost cell of a labyrinthine prison to which the scarabs and the threads of fate had led him. To Hyalhi’s mind it appeared a vast shadowy space, a cathedral to darkness or the immense tomb of a king who sought to emphasise his status with emptiness.

The only light was a faint glow without apparent source that pooled in the middle of the floor. Overhead Hyalhi had the impression of huge moving masses, the vast mechanisms of Borsis grinding down through the planet’s core, fuelling the weapon housed at the planet’s equator and providing the power to repair and animate its necron warriors.

Hyalhi approached the light. His senses took a moment to react to the absence of the glare from inside the cube – now they amplified the light until he could make out the shape of an ill-proportioned creature crouching on the floor.

The creature’s flesh was grey and lumpy, with a strange wet and malleable consistency. It

resembled a skinny and long-limbed humanoid in shape. It was covered in furrows and scars. Three gnarled fingers spread out across the floor. The ridge of its spine stood out as if it had been starved.

The figure looked up as Hyalhi approached. The movement dislodged lumps of its grey flesh and they thudded to the stone floor. There were no bones or organs underneath, just more wet grey matter, as if the creature was formed entirely from ragged clay.

The face had three eyes arranged over a lipless mouth. A headdress of tarnished gold dug into its scalp. Mountings for gemstones were empty. The eyes were dull ovals of cracked amber.

‘What are you?’ asked Hyalhi.

‘I am a god.’

‘The necrons killed their gods.’

The creature smiled. Particles of clay broke away from its face. Its voice was like dust. ‘They lie. We cannot be killed. But we can be broken.’

‘I have never had much love for riddles,’ said Hyalhi. ‘I tell them, I do not solve them. Speak plainly or I will be gone from here and you will never have what you wish from us.’

‘I am a god of the stars,’ said the creature. ‘Long ago the necrontyr begged us to save them. They had blundered into a war they could not win. The war against the Old Ones, the War in Heaven. Your kind cannot comprehend it. Your kind think in years, do they not? The single orbit of a world around its sun? It was millions of years ago. Your kind had not evolved then. Even before you existed, the necrontyr faced their extinction and they begged to be saved. And mine is a generous species.’

Hyalhi was a difficult man to lie to. Few people could lie to a Space Marine’s face at all, let alone a psyker. In addition Hyalhi could sometimes see the immediate past and future winding around a man, and could tell when his words did not match up with the truth fate was telling him. Here, however, there was no fate. The veil was hidden here, as if he was in a place that existed far away from both real space and the warp.

‘To them you were a god,’ said Hyalhi. ‘But to me you are one more xenos.’

‘And what does it matter?’ replied the creature. ‘We lived off the stars and at our will they were extinguished. The necrontyr called us gods, and so we were gods. They named us the c’tan. They built bodies of living metal so we might move among them. We promised them eternal life, and we gave it to them. We promised them victory in the War in Heaven. And before us the Old Ones were scattered and exterminated.’

‘I have seen your eternal life,’ said Hyalhi. ‘I have felt the echoes of it from the distant past. You ripped away their souls and remade them as these constructs, these parodies of life!’

‘They begged it of us!’ retorted the c’tan. ‘The necrontyr were defined by their deaths. Their bodies eroded beneath the sun of their world. Their lives were short and spent preparing for death. They built necropoli that reached the heavens while they scraped an existence in the rocks and sand. We freed them from death! We delivered to them the galaxy! And they betrayed us!’

Hyalhi could feel the alien’s hatred. It was not his psychic senses that detected it. The warp barely noticed the c’tan’s presence. Anyone, psyker or not, would have felt the cold fire of its hate prickling at their skin.

‘They turned the weapons we made for them against us,’ continued the c’tan. ‘Borsis was one of them. This world I built with my own hands, it was aimed now at me! In the moment of victory the necrons sought to destroy us but they could not. All they did was break us into shards and imprison each one. Some they cast into space, some they enslaved. I, Yggra’nya, the forger of planet and star, a slave to the race who have us to thank for their existence.’

Yggra’nya. The name Brother Ghazin had spoken the last time this creature had made contact with the Astral Knights. The god of Borsis.

‘And now,’ said Hyalhi, ‘you want to be free.’

‘I am the enemy of your enemy,’ said Yggra’nya with a thin, ragged smile.

Hyalhi looked up to the distant churning machinery. This was an echo of Borsis’s heart, and though it probably looked nothing like this in reality he was reminded of the sheer scale of the

Astral Knights' task. Their purpose was to destroy this world. Was that really something they could do alone?

'You are not the only ally we have,' said Hyalhi. 'You presume to be negotiating from a position of strength. You presume that we need you.'

'Turakhin will betray you,' replied Yggra'nya, spitting out the necron's name.

'And you will not?'

'What does a god care about humankind?' Yggra'nya waved a dismissive hand. 'I was here before you and I will be here when you are gone. Even as species go you are but nothing, a stain on the galaxy like mould. You will die out or be washed away, and the c'tan will not notice. Why bother betraying that which can do me no harm?'

'The necrons did you harm,' said Hyalhi.

'Once,' replied Yggra'nya. 'No species shall ever turn on the c'tan again.'

Hyalhi circled the c'tan slowly, like a scientist observing a specimen. 'This form,' he said, 'was carefully chosen. You wished to elicit sympathy so you decided to appear crippled. And this vault of shadows suggests the cruelty of your prison. But of course, you must remind us of the power you once had, and the power you hope to wield again, so you still wear the trappings of a king. You might have once had a god's power but your understanding of a human's psychology is crude at best. Do you think the Astral Knights will be swayed by an appeal to our pity? We pity nothing. We were raised to ignore the misery of the weak on our home world. Before we ever don the armour of a Space Marine we have long since failed to feel sympathy for any but our own.'

'Refuse me and die,' said the c'tan. 'It is not a threat, is it a truth you already know. Turakhin will betray you. Be it he or Heqiroth, the lord of Borsis will swamp you with every necron warrior on this planet. You cannot run from them forever, your brothers will be surrounded and butchered. The necrons might lose a thousand for every one of yours but your lives will still run out first. Tell me this is not true, Astral Knight.'

'And what will you do, Yggra'nya, when Borsis is destroyed?'

Yggra'nya held its hands wide in a gesture of reason and honesty. 'I will find a galaxy that appreciates a benevolent god.'

'The first thing you should have learned when planning to negotiate with humans,' said Hyalhi, 'is that we spit upon the alien. Even if he does claim to be a god.'

The shadow vault was dissolving. The machinery was drifting apart, cog by cog, replaced with indistinct darkness. It was the absence of information, like the static on an untuned pict screen. The c'tan became hazy, too, its form streaked with interference.

'Refuse me and die!' called out Yggra'nya as the vault fell apart around it and it sank into darkness. 'Varvenkast will die! And your oath will be broken!'

'What do you know of our oath?' demanded Hyalhi.

But there was no reply, for the connection was severed and the shadow vault was gone.



Addendum Auxiliary

During the last contact, a layer of perception was located that did not correspond to the chronological series previously comprehended. This layer was consistent with autoseance training suspects who possessed vivid memories of an emotionally significant or traumatic nature that were replayed or re-experienced in times of extreme mental stress. That a member of the Adeptus Astartes might succumb to such extremes of stress would previously have been unthinkable to this functionary, but given the contents of the associated contacts she now thinks it possible.

Though this memory's significance is unknown, the Emperor looks with favour upon those who perform their duty with thoroughness and completeness as well as zeal and so it and its associated fragments were recorded in accordance with this functionary's orders. This task was performed during mental hygiene procedures following the previous contact and so was completed without interference in this functionary's principal duties.

Black water flows through the streets. The hive sump has breached the lower levels and the effluent canals are overflowing. The population courses for higher ground, where the gun lines are waiting for them. As I watch, I can see the deaths of each one as a single bullet cuts through each thread.

The rings of Obsidia pass over the battlements of the fortress. The Chapter traditions demand we take to the rooftops and fight until the rings have moved out of sight, at least two days. The people of the city watch us, and try to spot their sons and brothers among the duellists. Most of us cannot be recognised any more.

I should flay the sin from my body. The flail in my hand and the blood on my back would give me a sense of righteousness. But this is not a shame that can be scoured away. It can only be put right. I walk from the scourging-hall and envy the brothers who can absolve their failures with pain.

Physical recovery procedures were undergone when mental hygiene was complete and the required rest period commenced. Given the presence of such mental stress on the part of the autoseance subject, this functionary must prepare for future contacts to become more strenuous.



SEVEN

Codicier Hyalhi

It was impossible to tell whether it was day or night on Varvenkast. The sky was permanently clouded with the smog from the hive's factoria. The hive stretched out into the hazy distance, rising up to the north in an immense mountain of industrial architecture. The upper levels were clad in marble for that was where the hive's aristocracy lived, among them Planetary Governor Lord Rheydolmar. Rheydolmar was currently under house arrest under inquisitorial authority. Quite possibly he would be executed before the next day dawned, whenever that might be.

It was not Hyalhi's concern. He had his duty, the Inquisition had theirs. From his position on the landing platform, where the Aquila shuttle had made landfall, Hyalhi could see the red streamers that marked out the target district. The inhabitants had come to Varvenkast a few generations before, and after settling this section of Hive Tertius had made the district their own.

And they had brought something terrible with them. Something for which they deserved to die.

'Follow,' said Chapter Master Derelhaan as he jumped down from the shuttle's ramp. 'We must strike before word spreads of our arrival. They are vermin, and like vermin they will scatter from the light of retribution.' Derelhaan was an enormous man, and clad in the half-gilded armour specially made for him by the Chapter artificers he resembled an ornate walking tank. He carried a thunder hammer and wore a storm bolter built into the back of his right vambrace.

The rest of the kill-team disembarked. Captain Amhrad led the seven-strong squad. They were veterans picked by Derelhaan for this mission, because he needed battle-brothers he could trust.

'When you are close enough, use your combat blades,' said Derelhaan. 'Do not waste the power packs of your chainswords or your bolter ammunition needlessly. Some battles need fury. This one needs efficiency. Move swiftly and do not tarry, for we will not pause to let you catch up.'

Derelhaan led the way through the upper levels. Here the people had made the place their home – shrines were everywhere, with offerings of their meagre lives left to placate an Emperor who despised them. The golden coins and household trinkets were an obscenity, as if they could ward off the punishment due to these people.

The planetary governor and his aristocracy would suffer for allowing their world to harbour this sickness. But first, the Astral Knights would cure it.

Below was the square where the business of this district was conducted. It was busy – the traders were hawking their wares and a street preacher was holding a sermon from the base of an equestrian statue. This place had, like almost all the hive, been built as a manufactory or refinery and only later adapted to house the hive citizens, as if the people actually living in the city were an afterthought. Perhaps the square had been an assembly floor or the base of a smelting pool.

'Captain Amhrad, take the lead right,' said Derelhaan. 'Hyalhi, with me.'

The squad split up to approach the square from right angles. Hyalhi heard a door slam and a cry of alarm. Word that Space Marines were in Hive Tertius would spread quickly. It would not be believed for a good few minutes, but as more and more spotted the huge armoured figures people would start to flee.

‘Their mutation is on the inside,’ said Derelhaan as he and Amhrad descended the tight stairways towards the square. ‘Two heads and tentacles are what the preachers tell us to watch for, but these creatures do not show such corruption.’

‘Then how can we tell the pure from the corrupt?’ asked Hyalhi.

‘Alas, there is no purity here. These mutants harbour colonies of parasites that infect others, so their offspring will be mutated, too. This is a heresy of the flesh that must be torn out by the root. That is why it had to be us, my brother. That is why I chose men like you.’

Hyalhi reached the opening of a narrow alleyway onto the square. The alarm was just reaching the people there. Some of them rushed about questioning one another, seeking out some authority who could confirm or deny the rumours already spreading. Hyalhi spotted the rest of the fireteam forming up on a balcony overlooking the square.

There must have been four hundred people there, living out the last minute of their lives. Hyalhi could almost taste the sensation of their threads cut short, and see the souls flopping lifeless as the puppet strings were severed.

‘In position,’ voxed Captain Amhrad.

The booming sound of breaching charges rang throughout the district as the other Astral Knights kill-teams moved into action. The purging had begun.

‘The Emperor watches,’ voxed Chapter Master Derelhaan. ‘Open fire.’



His Imperial Majesty's ship Needlefang

**Encryption Code Hemlock
Inquisitorial Eyes Only
Scrivened: Lord Inquisitor Quilven Rhaye
Addendum personal**

When I think about what I have done, I give thanks the Emperor placed in my soul the steel of an inquisitor. Once, I killed a whole nation. I incited its neighbours to tear down its fortress walls and heap its dead in the streets, to be hurled into the icy crevasses of the southern tundra. When that was too slow, I had them march the damned to the edge and herd them off, like surplus animals driven to their deaths because they were too much trouble to feed. I did this because the Emperor told me to. There was a tainted religion among them. Were all the murdered adherents to this dark faith? Of course not. One in ten? One in a hundred? Doubtful. But as their frozen eyes stared up at me from their mass graves, I did not feel regret or sorrow. I did not feel guilt. The Emperor had told me to do it, for if it was not by the Emperor's will how could a man rise to the rank of inquisitor, carry the seal, and bear with him the authority to make one civilisation murder another?

I killed my oldest friend. He had fought side by side and back to back with me in service to the Holy Ordos since I first joined their service as a lowly scrivener, then as an explicator and interrogator. He saved my life at the Battle of St Agmaran's Basilica. He tended my bleeding lungs as the Corpsefinder's Blight almost ended me. But my master Lord Inquisitor Golvuur suspected in him a laxity of zeal and a harbouring of doubts as to his purpose, and so I shot my friend through the neck as he slept. I did not grieve. I did not relive the memory of that night time and time again. The Emperor had told me to do it, for He acted through Golvuur, and through the agents of His Holy Ordos.

I stood by as Golvuur was executed before the Conclave of Seraphan. He was my master and I was sworn to defend him, no matter what awful things he might have done or commanded me to do in his stead. But I held the bowl as his throat was slit, because the Emperor had commanded Golvuur die to facilitate the obscure game of inquisitors and their power.

But I think we have done something here that I will look back on with regret and guilt. And even fear, though an inquisitor should never admit to something as mundane as fear. I have murdered worlds. I have betrayed every trust. I have pushed back the boundaries of what one man can willingly do to a fellow human being. But what I suspect has transpired here, I can never turn my mind towards with anything short of terror.

Whether I can continue in my duties, having in my mind such regret and doubt, will be my true test as an inquisitor of the Holy Ordos.

– Lord Inquisitor Quilven Rhaye.



EIGHT

Scout-Sergeant Faraji

‘Run!’ called out Brother Vehaal. ‘They’re coming from the east! To the crossroads! To the...’

And those were the last words he spoke. From the gloom emerged a pair of scythe blades, hazy and transparent as they hovered between existence and absence. The faint light glimmered along a slender limb of silver, and then across the carapace and insect-like head of a construct that loomed twice Vehaal’s height. It hovered above the ground trailing cabling and spine like the chains of an ancient ghost from some primitive mythology. Four more scythed limbs extended from the carapace, hissing and clacking as they moved. Its eye-lenses, assembled asymmetrically on its low-slung head, narrowed as they focused on the Space Marine Scout.

The scythes punched through Vehaal’s back and out through the chestplate of his demi-armour. Two more stabbed down through his shoulders and plunged deep into his chest cavity. The last pair sliced through either side of his waist, the tips emerging from Vehaal’s stomach. The construct drew Vehaal into a tight embrace as his eyes rolled back and the life drained from him. The bolt pistol and combat knife dropped from his hands. With a whirr of motors the construct whipped its blades outward and sliced Vehaal into half a dozen pieces that for a moment tottered in place before they fell apart and thunked wetly to the floor.

Scout-Sergeant Faraji just had time to see Vehaal die before the next pair of constructs drifted in behind the first. The human slaves called these necrons ‘wraiths’ and it was fitting, because they were more like ghosts than physical creatures. They could slip out of physical reality for a moment, long enough to drift through a wall or slide their scythe-limbs through their prey’s armour.

Prey. Down here in the necropolis, that was what the Astral Knights were. Faraji had never before felt such a profound sense of being hunted.

‘Cover and move back!’ ordered Faraji. ‘By teams, brothers!’

Faraji had trained these young recruits in the squad tactics of an Astral Knight and they responded automatically. In the times of the most extreme stress the body responded with instinct, and a Space Marine’s instincts were those of a soldier. Samahl dropped to one knee and Palao beside him, raking the passageway with shotgun fire as Rahaza and Nilhar ran past, out of the range of the wraith’s scythes. Kazzin fired with his bolt pistol as he ran, sliding into cover around the corner of an enormous tomb so he could bring his sniper rifle to bear.

In other circumstances, Faraji would have been proud of them. There was no room for pride when one of their own lay dead in pieces.

The shattering din of the gunfire died down as Samahl and Palao moved while the rest of the squad covered them in turn. The wraiths vanished through the wall, leaving only outlines of frost where they passed through the stone. The squad had driven the constructs off, for a while at least. A short distance down the passageway was a crossroads, glimpsed from a side passage as the squad passed it to escape from the wraiths. Faraji led the survivors of his squad through an archway of shimmering datamedium into the open ground of the crossroads.

Four immense tombs made up the crossroads, the spaces between them narrow alleyways of stone. One tomb was of greenish veined stone like dark marble, and its decorative accents were

worked into curves and scallops at odds with the necron taste for straight lines. An archway carved into the front of the tomb suggested a doorway, either a way in for the dead to pass on to whatever lay in wait, or a way out for the inhabitant to one day rise and emerge.

Two of the tombs were twins. The asymmetrical lines of one were echoed in the other. The front ends narrowed like the prows of ships, with complex cubic structures on top like a spacecraft's bridge. Perhaps they did symbolise the spacecraft of naval aristocrats. Rows of hieroglyphics ran along the sides of the twin tombs and Faraji could not help but imagine they were the names of battles in which the entombed had fought, like the battle-honours listed on the standards of Space Marine Chapters and regiments of the Astra Militarum.

The fourth resembled a great dark maw, a spiralling throat of carved stone like a whirlpool or a black hole in the void. This was how the necron inside had demanded it be remembered, drawn into an infinite churning throat.

'This is too open,' said Samahl as the squad moved into the crossroads.

'The wraiths can come at us from any angle,' said Kazzin, 'whether we have a wall around us or not. At least here we can see them coming.'

'Watch all the angles,' said Faraji.

'We should mourn him,' said Palao. 'And recover his gene-seed.'

'We mourn our dead when we have the chance,' replied Faraji. 'But we always mourn them as befits a battle-brother.'

'If you want to go back for his gene-seed, brother, be my guest,' said Samahl.

'Maybe I will,' retorted Palao. 'The Chapter's future is more important than my present.'

What future? Faraji could almost see Samahl swallowing the words. Samahl's attitude, still that of a young nobleman, had not yet been drummed out of him, but not even he would voice the thought the whole squad had. Recovering Vemaal's gene-seed organs would mean nothing if the whole Astral Knights Chapter ceased to exist.

'Rahaza, keep trying the vox,' ordered Faraji. 'The last we heard, Captain Sufutar was in this necropolis. If we raise his Third Company or Techmarine Sarakos we can link up with them.'

'How far does this necropolis go?' asked Palao. 'It feels like we've marched halfway across the planet by now.'

'The necrons are obsessed by death,' said Faraji, looking up at the tombs. 'Maybe that's all there is inside this planet. Just more tombs all the way to the core.'

Brother Kazzin shouldered his sniper rifle and clambered up onto the deck of the closest ship-like tomb. He crouched on the prow, his head cocked to one side like an attentive animal.

'I hunted,' said Kazzin, 'since before I could walk. My mother carried me on her horse as she rode out for phoenix season. We hunted them by the winds. I could taste them on the air. Borsis has its own winds, and they are alien, but I know them. They blow even down here. We are near the surface, brother-sergeant. The closest since we entered this necropolis.'

'Then you can get us out of here?' asked Samahl.

'Perhaps,' said Kazzin.

'None of us will leave,' said Faraji, 'if we do not remain vigilant. Consider the Codex, brethren. Hope is our enemy. Hope is the false chalice we rush to drink from, only to find it is still out of our grasp and we now stand surrounded by foes. Stay sharp. We still fight the same battle.'

Faraji knew well how a Scout, only one step removed from a raw recruit to the Chapter, could tune out the sermonising about the Codex and the Chapter traditions. Faraji himself could remember how all the battle-lore and quotes from the primarchs ran into one until they lost their meaning. As a Space Marine rose to the status of a full battle-brother his mind sharpened and he could sift out the knowledge he needed from the parables and proverbs, but until then his mind was vulnerable to being swamped in the mass of information making up the Codex Astartes.

He had been like them once. It was like reliving the memories of a different man, one decades younger, rich and privileged, who had won the honour of joining the Astral Knights but did not yet fully understand what that meant. It meant glory, of course, it meant a place in the pantheon of the Emperor's finest.

But more than any of that, it meant a cycle of sacrifice that continued until death. Perhaps his squad would learn that before the battle for Borsis ended, whatever form that end might take.

‘Nothing but static,’ said Brother Rahaza. ‘The vox is down. If we are near the surface there’s still enough between us and the open air to block it.’

‘Then we head up,’ said Samahl. ‘Sergeant?’

Faraji found himself staring at the tomb of green-veined marble. The swirling decorations were so at odds with the rest of the necropolis architecture that the tomb seemed out of place. Entwined in the scrollwork and scalloping were the lords of a necron dynasty, enthroned and surrounded by supplicant tech-constructs. Faraji assumed these were the necrons contained in the tomb, but he had never seen inside one. Did the construct bodies lie inside, or were they recycled like the bodies of dead slaves as Hyalhi’s honour guard had found?

A set of double doors, almost hidden in the decoration, reached to the top of the monumental tomb’s front surface. Most tombs Faraji had passed did not have doors – he had assumed they were constructed around the interned bodies and sealed at the moment of completion, or that they could only be accessed by removing the enormous slab that made up the roof. Did the necrons have some reason to enter it? Or to exit?

A rattling hiss echoed from the surrounding necropolis and the squad reacted instantly, bolting to alertness. Brother Kazzin sighted down the approaches to the crossroads through the scope of his rifle.

The sound came again, closer and seemingly from every direction. It sounded like a thousand dying breaths let out at once. Though none of the squad mentioned it, the sound hadn’t come from the hunting wraiths – those constructs were silent save for the faint slither of their trailing cables on the floor as they moved.

The first of the constructs moved into sight. The only light in the necropolis came from the glow of the hieroglyphics on the tombs, and a Space Marine’s enhanced sight could only reach so far through such near-complete darkness. Faraji glimpsed the red glistening of fresh blood on steel.

Metal feet scrabbled on the stone floor. Steel limbs clacked against the walls. One of the enormous scarab-constructs drifted into view next, its beetle-like carapace shielding a body with six segmented legs, one of its front limbs ending in a complex weapon of spinning projector tines and glowing power conduits. It had three green lenses set into its blunt head, and its underside seethed with dozens of scarabs. It was a canoptek spyder, reported by the slaves to be the custodians of the necropolis where they kept watch over the tombs and shepherded the ever-present swarms of scarabs.

‘Group up and fire!’ ordered Faraji. ‘Watch the angles! Don’t let them get behind us!’

Kazzin shot the approaching foot-construct through the skull. Faraji saw it was one of the constructs Hyalhi’s honour guard had reported encountering – the fast, spindly constructs that wore the skins of the dead. The slaves had called them ‘flayed ones’. They seemed to be a cursed underclass, diseased or outcast, that haunted the hidden and derelict areas of Borsis. Slaves who were cast aside or who escaped were said to fall prey to these scavengers, who were obsessed with wearing the skins of biological prey. They were creatures of cruelty and horror, but their psychological impact was wasted on Space Marines.

However, there were a lot of them. A dozen more lept and sprinted over the fallen construct. The spyder disgorged a mass of scarabs and the tip of its weapon glowed as it powered up. On the opposite side of the crossroads another pack of flayed ones approached, and behind them strode a squad of constructs similar to the warriors who made up the ranks of Borsis’s armies topside but larger and more armoured. The Astral Knights had a name for them, again thanks to Borsis’s slaves – immortals, named after a legion of unbeatable warriors from the legends of a frontier world Borsis had raided. Perhaps they were the necron equivalent of the Space Marines, elites who could wade through the worst the enemy could throw and strike back with the heavier weapons they carried.

Palao and Nilhar held the far side and rattled fire into the flayed ones. Palao’s shotgun blasted bloody chunks from the hides the enemy wore. Nilhar’s bolter was more useful at this

range, and Faraji let himself feel a little pride as Nilhar put close bursts of bolter fire through the central mass of three flayed ones.

The spyder opened fire and a lash of purplish energy whipped through the crossroads. It scoured deep furrows across the faces of the tombs and narrowly avoided taking Brother Samahl's head clean off. Samahl blasted a volley of shotgun fire into the scarabs swarming along the floor towards him – Faraji did the same with his bolt pistol, taking some satisfaction from the healthy kick of the weapon in his hand.

There were too many necrons. Faraji had known that before the engagement had begun. He had an under-strength squad and the enemy was approaching in numbers from all directions. His Scouts could not stand and fight.

'Rahaza!' he yelled. 'With me!' Faraji ran to the doors of the green-veined tomb. Rahaza was at his side, his own bolt pistol in his hands.

'Open it!' ordered Faraji. Rahaza realised the decorations on the tomb formed a door and tried to find purchase between them. For all Faraji knew the door was just a carving on the tomb's surface, but if it was real and allowed entry it was the only chance his squad had of survival.

Faraji forced his fingers into the crack between the doors and pulled. Rahaza was doing the same. He could hear gunfire and yelling from behind him and had to fight the instinct to turn and help the Scouts he had sworn to lead. But if he did, they would all die. He was absolutely certain of that.

'Lay a hand on a son of House Kelvanah,' Nilhar was yelling, 'and lose it!'

Faraji glanced back from the doors and saw Brother Nilhar had shouldered his bolter and drawn his twin combat knives as the flayed ones closed in to use their blades. Nilhar slashed around him, parrying the talons that stabbed at him and cutting through the throat of one of the constructs. Whatever cabling connected the components in its skull to the working of its body was severed. The flayed one flopped to the floor in a heap of spidery limbs and tattered flesh.

Palao blasted another flayed one in the chest with his shotgun. One of the construct's arms spun off, trailing scraps of skin. He racked the slider and fired again, rattling off shells into the pack of flayed ones closing on him. Faraji could see there were too many.

'Palao!' shouted Faraji. 'Fall back! Back!'

A flayed one grabbed Palao around the throat. Talons sank into flesh. Palao threw the construct off him and blasted the remaining shells into it as it writhed on the floor. He ran towards the centre of the crossroads, grabbing Nilhar by the shoulder. Crimson sprayed down his white-painted breastplate.

Faraji hauled again. The doors gave way, just a little. He forced both hands into the gap and Brother Rahaza did the same beside him.

Ancient, bone-dry air rolled out. Palao and Nilhar reached the doorway, firing as they moved. Palao was firing his shotgun one-handed, clutching his slashed throat with the other.

Brother Samahl was stabbing about himself with his combat knife to throw off the scarabs that were swarming over him. Steel mandibles chewed at the ceramite plates of his Scout armour. He and Kazzin were falling back, too, as more fire from the spyder raked across the tombs and the scarabs flowed from it as if its body concealed a bottomless well of metal insects.

The door was wide enough to admit the squad members. Faraji grabbed Palao and pushed him through first, then turned to help the others fend off the approaching constructs. 'Go!' he ordered. 'All of you, inside!'

The squad ran into the tomb as Faraji fired into the mass of approaching constructs. The elites in the rear ranks halted their advance and aimed their heavy gauss rifles at Faraji and he realised there was no more fighting to be done here. He ducked inside the doorway, ready to haul it shut behind him.

A hand closed around his ankle. Pain flared where the talons cut through the armoured boot. Faraji fell onto his front and turned over to see a flayed one on top of him.

It wore a human skin over its head and chest. Faraji's insides turned cold as he recognised the face of Brother Vemaal. It was raw and bloody, for it had been torn off the Scout's corpse just minutes earlier. Through the flapping opening of Vemaal's mouth glared a pair of eye-lenses,

covered in a film of fresh blood.

Faraji blasted up into the flayed one's body with his bolt pistol as he grabbed the construct's arm with his free hand before it thrust its talons into his throat. He wrestled it, trying to roll on top of it and pin it to the ground. It got its other arm free and Faraji had to let go of his pistol to trap that arm in his elbow before the talons raked at his face.

It was stronger than it looked and it fought like an animal, all uncoordinated fury and instinct. It was all Faraji could do to contain it. In the narrow doorway only one of the flayed ones could get at him, but others were crowding around to grab a leg and haul Faraji out into the crossroads.

They wanted to wear him as another cloak of flesh. That thought alone gave Faraji the strength to wrench one of the construct's arms around in its socket, to the accompaniment of tearing metal and sparks.

The flayed one reared up and tore its remaining hand free of Faraji's grip. It drew back its talons to impale Faraji through the face.

With a deafening report the upper half of the flayed one's head vanished in a burst of flame and shrapnel, taking the obscene sight of Vemaal's facial skin with it. Faraji glimpsed Brother Samahl standing over him and blasting another volley of shells into the flayed ones. One construct forced its way through to grab Faraji again but Brother Nilhar darted forward and jammed a combat blade through its eye-lens. The flayed one fell back and Nilhar grabbed Faraji under the arms, dragging him back through the doorway.

The rest of the squad were just inside the tomb. They pushed the doors closed again but not before a single flayed one got halfway over threshold. It was with a most satisfying crunch that the flayed one's head was caught between the closing doors and crushed flat.

'Can you walk, sergeant?' asked Brother Nilhar.

Faraji got carefully to his feet. One ankle and calf was lacerated, but the boot provided enough support and it was nothing he could not deal with. 'I can,' he said. 'Good work.'

'Well, we've locked ourselves in a tomb,' said Brother Samahl as he reloaded his shotgun. 'At least we've found an appropriate place to die.'

'What does the Codex say about striking a brother?' asked Palao.

'The primarch endorsed it,' replied Faraji, 'if it is justified. Kazzin, what lies ahead of us? These doors will not hold the necrons forever.'

Some trick of perspective and light made the tomb seem larger than it did from the outside. Its walls were of the same greenish marble, inlaid with golden pictograms that showed ranks of necron constructs arrayed as if for war. Floating war machines filled the sky above them and their lords, presumably from the dynasty entombed here, sat on massive ornate thrones held aloft by hordes of slaves. Faraji saw the green-skinned orks and slender eldar among those depicted as slaves, but no humans. Perhaps this tomb had been built before the necrons encountered humankind.

The light came from glowing strips along the floor and ceiling. Around the centre of the tomb floated stone sarcophagi that cast strange shadows across the walls. Each sarcophagus was different and each was more elaborate than the last. One depicted a crescent-shaped starship of a similar design to the necron fighters that had attacked the *Tempestus* on the way in. Another was a mass of miniature necron constructs carved in glossy black stone, all holding up the sarcophagus slab on which was carved the image of a regal necron with a mass of segmented tentacles in place of legs.

'It continues below us,' said Brother Kazzin. 'This is the tomb of a whole dynasty.'

'They're not following,' said Samahl, who was keeping his shotgun trained on the closed doors. There was no sound from outside. Not the scrabbling of flayed one claws against the doors, not the sizzle of the spyder's beam boring through the tomb wall, nothing. 'Why do they not follow?'

'Because they do not have to,' said Rahaza. 'They have us trapped. They know all the ways in and out.'

'Onward,' ordered Faraji. 'If they do not seek to force these doors, that means there is another way in they want to use to flank us. We will find it first.'

The black hole of the tomb plunged downwards, describing a spiral further into the innards of the necropolis. One of the most laboured points of the Codex Astartes was how a Space Marine never fought a battle without knowing what lay before him – the enemy, the lay of the land, the plans and counter-plans. He struck hard and fast, and watched the enemy crumble, because he was fully armed with all the intelligence to make victory an inevitability. Here the Astral Knights were blind and ignorant, and Faraji was leading the young brothers of his squad further into the darkness. He could not have defied the Codex more completely if he had tried.

That was the battle Chapter Master Amhrad had chosen to fight. The Astral Knights had crash-landed on Borsis with no knowledge of what was lying on the planet waiting for them. Sometimes even a Chapter Master had to cast aside the Codex to do the Emperor's duty – Faraji accepted that, even as he led his squad down a narrow passageway winding into the tomb's lower levels. He just wished he knew why Amhrad had made his decision. Whatever the reason, it had not been communicated to a Scout-sergeant like Faraji. If the Scouts were to ask him why the Astral Knights were on Borsis, Faraji did not know if he would have an answer for them.

The air was chill here, and the Scouts' breath formed icy vapour. The light came from the strips running around the walls, forming halos around the faces of necron dynasts. Other faces glared down from the ceiling. Niches in the walls contained skeletal sculptures, perhaps representations of the dynasts entombed behind those walls, perhaps the actual constructs encased in polished stone.

A quiet clattering and hissing came from beyond the walls, carried on the cold breath rising up from the tomb.

Faraji knew what was coming before he saw it. The Scouts did, too. He realised then why the necrons had let them flee into the tomb from the crossroads.

The first wraith drifted through the wall ahead. Its hunched body merged with one of the carved necrons for a moment, as if it was an ancient necron corpse rising from its sarcophagus. Another descended from the ceiling, plunging into the passageway with its blades ringing off the stone. It dived down at Faraji, scythes first.

Faraji threw himself backwards against the wall and the scythes slashed deep into the stone. He blasted half a magazine into it from his bolt pistol and components pinged off the wraith's body. It reeled and lashed at him, and Faraji felt the scythe cutting deep into his side. Anyone else would have opened up as much distance between himself and the wraith as possible, but Faraji was a Space Marine and he reacted with battle-lore instead of flawed instinct.

He dived inside the wraith's guard, where its scythes could not be brought to bear. He rammed his chainblade up into its torso, grabbing one of its mandibles before it could bite into his throat and face. Gunfire erupted around him, filling the passageway with chains of bolt-shells and shredding blasts of shot. Brother Palao dived onto the wraith as Faraji grappled with it and the wraith dropped to the floor. The cables trailing from its body lashed about like whips. The wraith bucked and threw Palao off it before it sank into the floor. Faraji lost his grip as it vanished through the stone.

The second wraith vanished, too, disappearing through the wall as gunfire from the rest of the squad pinged off its carapace. Palao got unsteadily to his feet.

'Sound off,' said Faraji.

'Unhurt,' said Samahl.

'It got my leg,' said Palao. 'I can walk but do not expect me to run.' Palao was in poor shape – the wound to his throat had not been mortal and it had closed up rapidly, but he had lost plenty of blood and now he was hobbled as well.

'Unhurt,' said Rahaza and Nilhar in rapid succession.

'Just superficial,' said Kazzin, who had a hand held over his eye. Blood oozed between his fingers. 'But you are wounded, sergeant.'

The pain caught up with Faraji. The scythe had sliced into his ribcage and it felt like a section of it was floating loose under the skin of his chest. The warmth of the blood running down the inside of his armour seemed scalding in the chill of the tomb. It was bad, but not bad enough to

stop him. 'We must keep moving,' he said. 'They will be back.'

He did not know what lay further down, but it had to be better than being trapped in the passageway or facing whatever still waited for them above at the crossroads. As they ran deeper into the tomb the wraiths struck again, darting out of the stone as fast as serpents. Each time the squad hammered fire at them and each time one of Faraji's battle-brothers was caught by a passing scythe that phased right through his armour and into flesh and bone. Kazzin lost three fingers on his right hand and switched his rifle to his left. Palao's other leg was wounded, a blade cutting deep through the meat of his thigh, and Samahl supported him as they moved on.

Ghosts. They were fighting ghosts. Faraji knew now how dangerous despair was to a soldier, because he could see himself collapsing to the floor and inviting the wraiths to finish him off just to end this. A Space Marine did not act on that despair. Though he was fighting ghosts, Faraji would fight on, because that was what it meant to wear the colours of the Astral Knights.

The wraiths burst into the passageway again. Faraji blasted the closest in the face with a volley of bolt pistol shots – half of them passed right through the half-real construct, but the others hit the housing of its insect-like head and the wraith dived back through the wall before it could attack. Palao and Samahl blasted back the other with shotgun fire, but not before it cut right through Nilhar's shoulder.

Then, Faraji saw the end of the passageway. It terminated in a great circular wall of stone covered in concentric rings of hieroglyphics.

'We're trapped, said Samahl, still supporting the wounded Palao. 'They chased us into a dead end.'

'You are fast to see our doom, brother,' said Kazzin. 'By the Codex, we fight until the end, no matter how apparent our deaths might be.'

'Damn the Codex!' retorted Samahl. 'Now we die. I accept it. Spend your last moments pretending they mean something if you will. I am not such a fool.'

'Quiet,' said Faraji. He placed a hand against the circular wall. The glow of the hieroglyphics brightened at his touch.

'They're waiting back there,' said Rahaza, who was covering the passageway behind the squad. 'Both of them. They do not approach.' Faraji glanced back and picked out the silvery shapes of the wraiths hanging patiently in the gloom.

'Probably until we starve,' said Samahl.

Faraji ran his hands across the stone. The light followed them. A strange instinct took him and placed in his mind the content of the last communication he had received from the other Astral Knights in the necropolis, the intelligence from Techmarine Sarakos about the only word any of them knew in the necron language.

Help.

Sarakos had transmitted the hieroglyph as a retinal projection to all the Astral Knights in range. Faraji had thought it was a pointless piece of information, typical of Sarakos who seemed more interested in collecting irrelevant knowledge than in fighting the Emperor's battles. But perhaps the Techmarine had known what he was doing after all.

Faraji could not see that hieroglyph among the carvings on the door. He put a hand against the wall again and traced out the shape of the hieroglyph in light.

The circle of stone shifted. Slowly it rolled aside, revealing a chamber beyond much larger than the confines of the passageway.

None of the Scouts spoke. Faraji moved through the doorway first, bolt pistol held warily high. Beyond was a vast structure held in an enormous hemispherical chamber. The structure formed a curved wall encompassing a circular space overlooked by a dozen statues. These were of the necrons in their fleshy form, with gnarled and scarred skin instead of the smooth lines of the tech-constructs. Faraji took this to mean this place was ancient, built before the necrons had abandoned their original bodies and become the machines they were now.

Lights sparked around the base of the wall as Faraji approached. They formed shapes in the air like a holographic projection. Necron hieroglyphs orbited glowing orbs that resolved into

what Faraji recognised as a star system. A yellow orb in the centre was a star, and around it a number of many-coloured planets, each with hieroglyphs presumably naming each world.

The Scouts spread out, instinctively checking each angle for lurking enemies. The chamber was empty aside from the structure in the centre, and Faraji had the impression it had been empty for a long time. Brother Kazzin walked into the projection, and as the lights played across him Faraji realised the hologram was projected from the eyes of the necron statues.

‘Brothers, a test,’ said Faraji. ‘What do you see?’

‘Not the Varv system,’ said Nilhar. ‘That has eleven worlds, and no gas giants of that size.’

‘Then what?’

‘I do not recognise anything from the battle histories,’ said Palao.

‘No, it is not the history of our Chapter,’ said Kazzin, looking at the worlds slowly orbiting around him. ‘It is from the scriptures.’

A twining red line was curving around the room, forming a route approaching the system in the centre from slightly above. It was the path of an approaching spacecraft.

‘The scriptures?’ asked Samahl.

‘Nine planets,’ said Faraji. ‘With a mid-cycle star. Four gas giants. An icy rock at one extreme, barely a planet at all. A scorching ball of stone at the other, then a toxic orb, then a world every human knows well by instinct. Do you not see it, brothers?’

‘The Sol system,’ said Nilhar.

‘Sol,’ said Faraji.

Faraji walked to the third planet of the system. It had an unfamiliar look – it was shown in blue and green, a strange tessellation of land masses and oceans. But if the oceans were stripped away and the land blackened and scarred, if the great stain of a continent-sized structure were blistered up from it like the welts of a disease, it suddenly became appallingly familiar.

‘This is Terra,’ said Faraji. ‘Earth. And this, Mars.’ Faraji indicated the rust-red orb of the fourth planet. That, at least, was more recognisable from the illuminations of holy books, missing only the vast forge structures around Olympus Mons and the orbital docks that housed the Battlefleet Solar.

The starship route spiralled into the heart of the system and terminated at the red planet. Hieroglyphics blossomed around it.

‘They’re headed for Mars,’ said Kazzin.

‘Borsis?’ asked Samahl.

‘What else?’ said Faraji. ‘This is the tomb of Borsis’s lords. This is where they recorded their destiny. To take Borsis to Mars.’

‘And what will they do when they get there?’ asked Samahl.

‘They will do what Borsis was made for,’ replied Rahaza. ‘It has blown whole planets out of the sky and taken every weapon our fleets have thrown at it. If we do not stop it here and it reaches Sol, it will destroy Mars and probably take Terra with it for good measure.’

‘We must get to the surface,’ said Faraji. ‘This has to reach Amhrad.’ He turned to Brother Kazzin, whose face was lit by the holographic image of ancient Terra passing across him. ‘Can you lead us there?’

‘Get me out of this tomb,’ said Kazzin, ‘and I can.’

‘Find us a way out!’ ordered Faraji. ‘And not the way we came in.’

The squad spread out around the chamber, looking into every shadowed corner for a doorway or passage. Brother Rahaza clambered up the huge semicircular wall that encompassed the holographic image, which reset and showed the approach route of Borsis intersecting with the Martian orbit on a loop. The domed roof of the chamber was almost lost in darkness, as was Rahaza as he climbed.

How long before the wraiths attacked? Perhaps this chamber was forbidden to them, or they were, as Samahl had sulkily predicted, waiting for thirst or hunger to weaken the Scouts. It would take weeks, but Faraji imagined the wraiths were supremely patient creatures. And that was assuming other constructs did not find their way down to them. Perhaps the flayed ones were approaching that very moment through a hidden passageway.

Despair was an enemy. It was one that had to be overcome before a man could call himself an Astral Knight. But down here, with the appalling truth of Borsis's purpose revealed and the whole of the planet seemingly between them and getting that truth out, it loomed larger than Faraji had ever felt it.

Faraji's hand went unconsciously to the wound in his side. It came away sticky with rapidly congealing blood.

'There's an opening up here,' voxed Rahaza. 'It looks like maintenance access.'

'Secure it, brother. We will join you. Samahl, help Palao.'

Faraji ignored the pain throbbing from the wound as he followed Rahaza's path upwards, the carvings affording enough handholds to clamber up to the top. From here he could see the nine planets of the Sol system orbiting around the sun. From that tiny blue-green orb, surrounded by grander planets, humanity had spread across the stars in the vast and tragic era of the Scattering. Then came the Dark Age of Technology, and the inevitable Age of Strife when wars threatened to exterminate the whole species. The Emperor arose and reconquered Terra, and used it as the foundation for the Great Crusade and the Space Marine Legions that spearheaded it. All that from a single world, one of a million in the galaxy. How much of that had been an accident? What if Borsis had awoken a million years earlier, barely any time at all against the age of the galaxy? Would there be a humankind, an Emperor, an Imperium?

The loss of blood must have been making Faraji light-headed to think of such a ridiculous heresy.

Rahaza had found a ring of openings around the apex of the dome. Through them ran a tangle of cables and conduits, wreathed in wisps of frozen vapour, the gaps around them perhaps just large enough for a Space Marine Scout to make it through.

'Go ahead of me,' said Faraji. The Scouts had not yet completed their transformation into full Space Marines, and their muscle mass had still to reach its final bulk. Faraji was larger. If any of them got stuck, it would be him.

Rahaza led the way. Faraji followed the Scouts, hauling himself through the opening. He had to drag himself through, feeling the cabling tear free around him. The steel below him was freezing and ruptured conduits sprayed chill vapour into the narrow space.

'There's a loose panel overhead,' said Rahaza. 'I'm going through.'

The squad left a trail of smeared blood in their path. Faraji was sure he added to it as he moved. He could hear the clatter as the Scouts forced their way through to the floor above.

Palao reached down from the hole in front of Faraji and helped the sergeant through. Rahaza had brought them to a long gallery overlooked by scores of tombs. They were crowded into walls of sarcophagi reaching up hundreds of metres into the darkness.

'Looks like this was the cheap option,' said Samahl. 'If you can't afford a proper tomb, this is where you end up.'

'Well, that decides it,' said Nilhar. 'I'm not dying here with all the plebs.'

'Kazzin?' said Faraji.

Kazzin walked a short distance away, head tilted upwards. 'This way,' he said. 'We're close. I can hear the city settling above us. It is raining on the surface.'

The Scouts followed Kazzin through the walls of tombs. They were in a ragged state, Faraji saw. Only Rahaza and Samahl were unhurt. Palao could barely walk.

'Ammunition count,' ordered Faraji.

The squad were running low on ammunition as well as blood. Kazzin still had enough sniper rifle ammo for a good battle, but in the confines of the necropolis it wasn't the most practical weapon. The shotguns had little more than a full reload left each. Nilhar's bolter had half a magazine. Between them the squad had just over a magazine left per bolt pistol.

Faraji didn't have to tell the Scouts to conserve their ammunition. They all had combat knives and Faraji had his chainblade. If they faced a protracted fight, blades and bare hands would have to do.

'Hear that?' said Rahaza as the Scouts rounded a corner to reveal a long slope heading slightly upwards, flanked by tombs shaped like starships and palaces.

‘Scarabs,’ agreed Kazzin.

A moment later the sound reached Faraji, too – thousands of scuttling metallic legs. ‘Double time,’ he said, and the squad picked up the pace as they continued upwards.

Now even Faraji could taste the change in the air. The ancient, dead atmosphere of the necropolis was diluted here, as what passed for fresh air on Borsis seeped in from above. Shafts of filmy light found their way down from the surface. They were close.

A single flayed one lept onto the top of a tomb flanking the route out of the necropolis. Fresh blood ran down its steel face as it peered at the squad. Kazzin raised his rifle and let a single shot punch through the necron’s skull. It clattered down from the tomb, leaving a smear of blood on the black marble.

Behind the squad came the clanking step of dozens of necron feet. They scattered into cover as the legion from the crossroads appeared, led by the elite warrior-constructs, the immortals. The flayed ones cowered behind them – they had failed to butcher the squad in their first meeting and now they moved like whipped dogs as the immortals took on the task in person. The spyder drifted behind them, joined by a second which lacked the energy weapon and instead sported twin claws with a crackling power field winding around them.

Among them moved the pack of wraiths, also reinforced. Five of them now hunted Faraji’s squad, phasing through the tombs as they closed in.

A pair of necron nobles now led them, taking up the rearmost rank as they directed their minions to advance. One was flanked by a phalanx of warrior-constructs, and yet was clearly visible as it stood head and shoulders above them. It did not share their hunched gait but stood proud and upright, and its carapace was clad in sea green and crimson. It carried a tall golden staff topped with the image of a sun, and white fire played around it. The necron’s headdress, with twin curving spires like the mandibles of a scarab, echoed those on the statues and reliefs throughout the tombs.

The second noble had a bulky anti-grav unit in place of legs and hovered two metres above the floor. The unit was hung with banners of segmented metal and its broad chest was inset with a fat ruby the size of a man’s head. Its arm was a gauss cannon bleeding greenish energy and its eyes were bright points of scarlet in the gloom.

‘Strangers,’ said the upright noble, amplifying its voice and speaking in haughtily accented Low Gothic. ‘Know that you are prey to a finer breed of necron. Where the vermin of these tombs have failed we have been tasked with succeeding. To hunt in the necropolis is a lowly and foul thing, but your trespass has compelled us to pursue you in person. For this insult done to us you will be punished. For the desecration of our tombs, you will be punished. For your denial of the sovereignty of Overlord Heqiroth, you will be punished. Would that we could kill you a hundred times over for each violation, aliens. But once will have to suffice.’

The immortals were marching along the parallel passageways, flanking the group. The constructs lined up like firing squads ready to wither away any squad member who broke cover.

‘Move and fire,’ said Faraji. ‘Their numbers will be their enemy. In the crossfire they will...’

‘Sergeant,’ said Brother Kazzin. ‘Go.’

‘Get to the surface, sergeant,’ agreed Samahl. ‘We can’t beat them but we can slow them down. And one of us has to make it topside.’

‘We fight and die together,’ said Faraji.

‘My brothers are correct,’ said Rahaza. ‘Our mission is not to die down here together. Perhaps it was before, but not now. You have to tell Amhrad what we found down here. You have decades of experience on us, you will make it. It has to be you. We will keep the necrons here. It the confusion, you can escape.’

‘It is our duty,’ said Nilhar. ‘And it’s yours.’

‘And even Samahl agrees with us,’ added Palao. ‘It’s that obvious.’

Faraji looked from one face to another. These were his brothers, but more than that – they were his responsibility. His task was to lead them and to teach them, and foremost to never abandon them.

But what had he been teaching them? Above all, their duty and what it meant. And perhaps

here, they were showing him they had learned that lesson.

Perhaps Faraji's duty to them was fulfilled. And a far greater duty had to take over.

'Decide what you will,' said Samahl. 'But for Throne's sake make it quick.'

'You will be remembered,' said Faraji. 'And I will mourn you all.'

'Mourn the rest,' said Samahl, 'but I was never going to fight as a full Astral Knight. We all knew that. This way I get the death my house dreamed of.'

'Then keep to cover, check targets, and lead them into crossfires,' said Faraji. 'Kazzin, do not keep too great a distance. Nilhar, tight shots to the central mass. Samahl, do not be so quick to empty your gun. Palao, cover your brethren and watch their backs. Rahaza, you're in charge. Lead them well.'

'Understood,' said Rahaza. 'Now go.'

Rahaza led the squad out of cover. Faraji broke a moment later, running from tomb to tomb up the slope towards sunlight. Gauss fire streaked across the tombs, filling the necropolis with painful strobing light.

'Immortals left!' Rahaza yelled over the vox. Faraji could hear bolter and shotgun fire.

'Down!' came a strangled cry from Palao.

Faraji ran. He glanced back, just once, but he could make out nothing coherent in the storm of light and flying debris.

'Still you defy!' boomed the voice of the necron noble. 'Still you...'

The metallic voice was cut off by the report of Kazzin's rifle.

Faraji kept moving. Stray gauss blasts stripped layers off the statues lining the promenade leading upwards. Shafts of light fell more frequently among the tombs and Faraji could see the rows of sepulchres stretching off in their thousands. The squad's vox-net was a mess, nothing more than snatches of words and gunfire.

A cold wind blew. Ahead a section of the tombs had fallen in, blocking the way. Faraji clambered up the sundered stone, over the fragments of grand statues and fallen lintels. He saw a corroded necron skull staring up at him from the rubble. Faraji reached the crest of the collapse and saw, ahead of him, the surface.

The tombs opened up into a district of ruin, with drifts of debris spilling down into the lowly tombs nearest the surface. Malformed steel predators picked their way through the rubbish. The surrounding buildings were spindly iron skeletons with their substance stripped away. If Borsis had a slum, this was it. Faraji emerged from the shadow of the tombs into the pit of rust and decay.

A scavenger-construct scuttled across the wreckage nearby. It looked like it had been assembled from random necron parts. It was a spindly quadruped with asymmetrical limbs, and it was sifting through the debris for new parts with which to repair itself. It fixed Faraji with a single offset eye-lens. Faraji took a step closer and the scavenger clattered off.

Faraji opened up the squad channel on the vox. He heard the ripping sound of gauss fire through the static, and the stutter of bolters.

'Palao!' cried Nilhar, his voice barely audible through the distortion of the vox-net. 'Palao's down! Brothers! Speak to me, brothers!'

More gunfire. The sound of blades against ceramite.

The vox went dead.

Faraji switched to the Astral Knights command channel.

More static. Faraji leaned against an outcrop of rusted steel, suddenly exhausted. The wound in his side throbbed angrily and the pain in his lacerated ankle was fighting through painkillers dispensed from his Scout armour. He took stock of his surroundings, expecting ranks of necron warrior-constructs to appear around the edge of the pit with their gauss blasters all trained on him. But he was alone here, save for the malformed scavengers. The only sound was the thin whistle of the cold wind and the low rumble of the debris settling.

'...pulling back from the forum,' came a voice over the vox. The static resolved into the sound of bolter fire and the voice of Captain Ifriqi of the Seventh Company. 'They're approaching from the north and west. We can hold the second ridge and draw them into a crossfire.'

‘Acknowledged,’ came the reply, and Faraji recognised Chapter Master Amhrad. ‘Do not become too strung out. Rendezvous at the second fall-back point.’

‘Brothers,’ said Faraji. ‘Chapter Master. Faraji here.’

‘Faraji!’ exclaimed Amhrad. ‘Report your position.’

‘I do not know,’ said Faraji. ‘We were separated in the crash. My squad is lost. I alone survive. I have failed them, Chapter Master. I left them behind. But I had to make it to the surface to tell you.’

‘Compose yourself, Scout-sergeant,’ said Amhrad. ‘Tell us what?’

‘They’re heading for the Sol system,’ said Faraji. ‘To Mars, my lord. To Terra.’



*Orbital Supply Station Madrigal 12
High Polar Orbit, Safehold
Varv System*

**Encryption Code Hemlock
Inquisitorial Eyes Only. Ref. Lord Inquisitor Quilven Rhaye
Scrivened: Medicae Obscurum Kalliam Helvetar
Addendum Tertiam**

This functionary has suffered from nightmares.

This is not unusual as she has experienced them from childhood. However, the nightmares suffered in association with autoseance contacts are of sufficiently atypical nature, and correspond closely enough with memory-fragments experienced during contact with the subject, that this functionary has chosen to record them here. They were experienced over a period of forty-eight hours, during the required period of psychological decompression between contact attempts.

This addendum has been void-safed along with the annotated transcripts of the autoseance contacts, given the potential of their contents. It had not escaped the notice of this functionary that these nocturnal hallucinations constitute justification for presentation to the Inquisitorial authorities as per the standing orders given to the Varv Deliverance Fleet by Lord Inquisitor Rhaye. His functionary shall duly present herself upon completion of the autoseance procedures.

The most lucid of the nocturnal visions are as follows:

I am hanging in the void. I am aware that I am of great size and that time is sped up to the point where my fellow planets spin rapidly as they swing in great circles around my star. My star is a fountain of yellow warmth in the infinite cold. One brother is rust-red and barren. Another is a noxious mass of poisonous cloud. Fecundity erupts across me. Life spreads and changes form. It scatters from me like seed pods picked up by an unfelt wind. Corruption follows it, and I become polluted and decayed, tendrils of darkness worming through me. Finally another world enters orbit, bright silver and shining with power. The corruption throughout me causes me immense pain. I beg the newcomer to end it. Happily, blissfully, a pulse of crimson energy pierces me right through and the silver planet fulfils my wish...

I kneel before my gods. Some heretics claim they are merely parasitic aliens who seek to drain us of our vitality and leave us withered and dead. But the heretics will be left behind and forgotten. The star-gods move among us in bodies we built for them. The face of one falls upon me. I am bathed in its expression of beneficence and love. I am incapable of doubt. Our enemies will fall before the star-gods. We will be granted eternal rule over the galaxy. My god is three times the height of any of us, his body made of liquid gold. His hand reaches out and touches me. I am filled with light and love. Then I am gone from my body, and where there was warmth I am steeped in nothing but the void...

I am locked in a tomb. I have been here for millions of years. I have lived and remember every second. Time has become a torture device. Every moment is suffering. I have gone through rage, contemplation, and insanity, and come through each no more able to shrug off the awful inevitability of time. And yet I hear a stranger's voice. It promises me I can be free. It promises me death. Both are the same to me. All I have to do is reach out to him and he will carry me from my sepulchre. But he is far away and from my prison my voice can barely be heard. I cry as loudly as I can, and I feel the stranger's eyes upon me...

The ship's alarms are blaring. I am surprised they still function. Outside the planet is shaking

as if trying to throw off its outer layer and birth whatever lies at its core. For all I know it is doing exactly that. I can also hear, far closer, the rising roar of the plasma vessels. Those that remained intact have now been breached and soon a critical tide of plasma will roar through the decks. I am ready for their nuclear fire. My only concern is that my head survives. My head, and enough of the rest to be identified. I pray the shielding will hold enough for that. It is the last prayer I will speak. I make it an earnest one, to the Emperor and His primarchs. If it is answered, I cannot tell, for the roar is growing louder by the second...

Upon awakening from each such episode, this functionary conducted mind-scourging rituals with meditation and prayer to remove the traces of moral threat that may have been created. Though this left her in a suboptimal mental state, nevertheless the slow but continuing putrefaction of the subject corpse required immediate continuation of the autoseance process.

Higher doses of mental and somatic stabilisers were administered, and a medicae servitor tasked with monitoring life signs for the side effects likely to ensue. With these precautions undertaken, primary contact with the subject was again achieved.



NINE

Chaplain Masayak

As the new body of the would-be Overlord of Borsis took its first steps, the great arena shuddered as it must have done millions of years ago. Then, the necrontyr had gathered to watch the vast blood spectacles held to honour their new star-gods. Alien beasts and slave-gladiators had fought for the entertainment of the crowd. Now the place was a crater of cold steel, watched over by the vast energy generator towers of the district. Lightning crackled between the pylons whose spires reached the clouds streaking the sky. Flocks of flying scarabs wheeled overhead, feeding off the electricity arcing between the towers. And from beneath the arena floor emerged Turakhin.

Chaplain Masayak watched the ground heaving up as Turakhin dug his way out of the hidden vault. The arena floor was covered with iron filings as another might be with sand. The Astral Knights assembled here gave Turakhin a wide berth – none of them trusted the necron, even if they had an enemy in common. For that, Masayak silently praised them.

Turakhin's new body was a war machine of immense size. It had eight articulated legs, each segment a slab of polished and inscribed steel, supporting a body similar in shape to an enormous version of Borsis's ever-present scarabs. It was somewhat larger than a battle tank of the Imperial Guard. Atop this hull was a humanoid torso, again enormous, resembling that of an oversized necron warrior-construct. The head was a mass of targeting lenses arranged around a multi-barrelled gauss weapon. One arm was a huge claw, with massive shovel-like blades to tear down obstacles and barricades. The other was another gauss weapon, this time with a single massive barrel and glowing power coils attached by cabling to the cylindrical generator units mounted on the hull.

'A body fit for the overlord,' blared Turakhin's voice from the war machine's vox-casters. 'A body fit to tear the usurper apart. Do what you will, my friends, destroy whatever Nephrekh dogs stand in your way, but grant to me the honour of destroying Heqiroth!'

'Leave the parcelling out of honours for when our mission is done,' said Masayak. 'We fight as one, overlord.'

'For now,' said Turakhin. 'I grow impatient. We march!'

Chapter Master Amhrad had ordered Masayak and the Seventh Company under Captain Ifriqi to join up with Captain Khabyar's Ninth. The arena had been chosen as their muster point as it was close to the suspected new location of Heqiroth's court, and because it housed one of the vaults Turakhin had used to keep his new bodies. The force represented a sizeable chunk of the Astral Knights strength on Borsis, almost two hundred Space Marines, along with the human slave guides. And, of course, Turakhin.

Masayak turned to the two company captains who had joined him in the gallery. This was perhaps where past Overlords of Borsis had watched the spectacles in the arena. Now it served as the strikeforce command post.

'Which one of us will kill it?' asked Captain Ifriqi.

'Always too fast to pull the trigger,' said Captain Khabyar. 'Turakhin will be dealt with in time. Let it be useful first.'

'So speaks a Devastator captain,' retorted Ifriqi. 'You should have destroyed Turakhin the

moment it showed itself. We do not need it.'

'We will take every advantage we can,' said Masayak. 'And when the enemy of our enemy proves itself a new enemy, we will destroy it. Thus spoke the primarch, thus reads the Codex Astartes. If there are no further dissensions, I agree with Turakhin on this point. We leave now.'

The two captains ordered their sergeants to gather at the arena exits for the short march to the target zone. On the arena floor the Astral Knights were suddenly in motion, hurrying past Turakhin to take up the marching order.

'We run our battles close on this world,' said Captain Ifriqi. 'And every objective seems the last. How many chances will we have on Borsis after this one?'

'We will not need another,' said Masayak. 'Have faith, and your brothers will take it from you. To your duties, captain.'

The first responsibility of a Chaplain was to rise above the truth.

That was the lesson taught to aspirants to the Chapter Reclusiam. Recruits who had earned the status of a full battle-brother and who possessed the necessary combination of willpower and obedience were apprenticed to the Reclusiam to learn the ways of the Chaplains. They would become the spiritual leaders to the Chapter, advisors to the Chapter Master and figures of wrathful inspiration on the battlefield. It was a burden very few could be expected to shoulder. Masayak was one who could.

The truth was that the Astral Knights were losing on Borsis. Every objective required more fury and luck to achieve, and each one promised greater disaster if it was not. Zahiros's failure to kill Heqiroth had sparked an endgame on Borsis with Heqiroth constantly moving to foil the Astral Knights' attempts to pin him down and assassinate him, while the necrons relied on the attrition that was inevitable when they had millions of warrior-constructs to spend in whittling away the hundreds of Astral Knights. Every strategic assessment would determine the Astral Knights could not win on Borsis. They could not even retreat – destruction was the only possible result.

But a Space Marine had to rise above such a truth, and he did it by following the Chaplains. When defeat was certain and duty was impossible, a Chaplain spoke of an inevitable victory and duty fulfilled. A Space Marine had the strength of mind to believe him.

And the Chaplain? He had the strength of mind to believe himself.

Masayak refused to believe the truth that was placed before him. The truth was a petty thing. His truth, that the Astral Knights could be inspired to defeat Heqiroth and destroy Borsis, was the only truth conducive to the Astral Knights fighting at their full capacity.

And sometimes, on rare occasions written of in the Chapter histories, that truth became a reality. The Chaplains led their battle-brothers to impossible victories, because they did not accept the concept of any victory being impossible.

The beginning of that impossible victory would lie within the dark labyrinth of the generatorium district. Here enormous turbine houses and towering pylons cast a wreath of incessant lightning across the sky. Vast amounts of power were dredged up from somewhere deep below the surface of Borsis and routed across the surface of the whole planet. The resulting structures formed vast canals and blocky peaks with no roadways, and so travelling across them was a slow and precipitous affair that taxed even the Space Marines.

After three hours a splinter of the strikeforce had reached its objective, one of the pylons. The pylon was a hollow spire that thrummed with power. Lightning cascaded down its sides as it bled off excess energy from the generators below.

'Souls and bodies be warded, brethren,' voxed Masayak to Squad Gehesson. 'The enemy must not have leave to gather himself and strike back. All must be fury.'

Sergeant Gehesson led a Devastator squad, loaded down with heavy weapons. They were not ideally armed for a close-quarters assault, though that was exactly what they were likely to face. The responsibility to lead them in the charge would therefore fall on Masayak himself, who fought with crozius and bolt pistol.

'Make ready to breach,' voxed Gehesson, struggling to be heard over the crash of the lightning. 'Stay tight and do not stop. Move in the Chaplain's wake.'

One battle-brother clamped a demolition charge to the tower's double doors.

'Twenty seconds,' voxed the brother as the rest of the squad took cover.

Hajar, this Astral Knight was named. Resolute and aggressive, with more than a touch of pride. An Astral Knight through and through. Those were the kind of men Gehesson cultivated in his squad, straightforward and arrogant as the sergeant himself.

The charge blew and the doors were ripped inwards, thrown off their mountings in a mass of blackened steel. Masayak vaulted out of cover and ran into the tower. The power field around the crozius in his hand crackled on and the flickering bluish light caught the shapes of the warrior-constructs waiting on the lower floor.

The necrons were anticipating exactly this kind of attack. It did not matter. Masayak's truth was that the necrons were hopelessly unprepared and caught by surprise, and he fought accordingly.

Masayak dived into the necrons and brought his crozius down on the head of the nearest. Before it had the chance to bring its gauss blaster to bear the mace-like crozius crushed through its skull and upper chest. The power field burst it open and shards of it flew across the chamber.

'Thus are the wages of the xenos!' bellowed Masayak over the vox. 'Thus does the Emperor's justice fall!'

The squad crashed in behind Masayak. Bolter fire streaked past him. Sergeant Gehesson wrestled a necron to the floor and rammed his chainblade up into its abdomen and out through the back of its shoulder. Sparks sprayed from the ruptured construct's body. Brother Ghular wielded his heavy bolter like a massive club and knocked another warrior-construct clean through an interior wall, revealing the pulsing power coils running up the core of the tower.

Masayak forged upwards. A spiral staircase ran around the tower's core. Each segment revealed was crammed with xenos machinery, glowing coils and silver orbs which spat arcs of electricity between them. Niches in the walls held spare construct components – steel skulls lined up like a hunter's trophies, rows of hanging arms, segments of spine and ribcage, replacements for parts lost in the dangerous work around the generatorium district.

Masayak rounded a corner to come face to face with a work-construct, its lower limbs heavily reinforced, additional hydraulics powering arms which ended in shovel-like claws. Masayak beheaded it with a sweep of his crozius before it could react, and put three bolt pistol shots through the warrior behind it.

More warriors were streaming down from the upper floors. In this situation a regular human soldier would halt and take cover, and try to winnow away the attackers with attrition. But Masayak did not have the numbers for that, and time was too great a pressure. He dived into the charging necrons, ignoring the gauss blasts that stripped furrows from his power armour, and struck all about him with his crozius as the lightning of its power field crashed around him.

Squad Gehesson struggled to keep up. They might want to halt, but Masayak could not let them. He would drag them with him to victory. Only Brother Ghular kept pace, as the bulk that made him capable of wielding his heavy bolter so easily also made him a human battering ram. He didn't draw his combat blade or fire a single shot, instead crushing and stamping the warrior-constructs in front of him and leaving his battle-brothers behind him to finish off the fallen.

Near the pinnacle of the tower, where the walls gave way to skeletal ribs letting the ozone-heavy wind whip through, Masayak faced a necron of fine and ornate workmanship. It was a worker-construct, but one whose additional components were suited for combat too. It wore the hieroglyphs and lacquered armour plating that Masayak by now recognised as the marks of the necron nobility.

'Tell your kind,' said Masayak, 'that as you fall, so shall they all follow.'

'And as you fall,' replied the invader in a metallic rumble, 'you will be cast down among the vermin. All of you. Vermin.'

The noble fought with a circular saw attached to one arm, and the blade screamed as it sliced through the air towards Masayak. Masayak ducked under it and shattered the construct's elbow joint with his crozius. The saw fell to the floor and spun out of control, chewing through one of the ribs making up the walls. The pinnacle of steel fell into the tower between Masayak and his

enemy, and the two had to disengage before they were crushed to the floor.

‘You invade our space,’ said Masayak. ‘And you destroy our worlds. You are the vermin, the locusts who consume. We are the cure.’

‘We ruled this galaxy before you existed,’ came the reply. The noble lifted a replacement arm from a rack of tools on the wall – this one was a cutter or welder fuelled by a large cylindrical fuel tank, and a blue-white flame leapt from its nozzle. ‘We will rule it again. And when we do, it will not remember you.’

The cutter ripped through the fallen steel beam and the two halves fell away. Masayak lunged, parrying the thrust of the cutter and knocking the noble’s arm away. Masayak leapt in to follow up, driving a knee into the noble’s midriff. Decorated armour clattered onto the floor. Cables hung loose from the necron’s chest where the plating buckled and fell away.

Masayak grabbed the noble’s other arm and wrenched it around. He felt the joint pop out of place and spun the necron away from him. He rammed the crozius into the necron’s spine, this time letting the full force of the power field sunder the metal. The necron fell against Masayak with its full weight as its legs were suddenly useless. Masayak hauled the necron off its feet and held it over his head.

He walked to the edge of the floor. Below him the generatorium district stretched out, lit by the broken strobes of lightning between the towers. The noble struggled, but the damage done to its control systems was too severe.

‘I am mankind,’ said Masayak, ‘and I am extinction.’

Masayak hurled the noble over the edge. He watched it fall, clattering off the middle levels of the tower. It hit the ground and the fuel tank of its cutter must have been ruptured, for a blossom of crimson fire burst at the base of the tower.

Masayak turned to see Squad Gehesson emerging from the stairway. They had not come to assist him, for they all knew this was his fight. A Chaplain sometimes had to serve as his Chapter’s champion, and single out a notable enemy to be fought and defeated as a symbol of a Space Marine’s superiority.

Gehesson had his hand on Brother Ghular’s shoulder, where he had held the huge Astral Knight back. Ghular had wanted to intervene. Gehesson had stopped him. The sergeant knew his role well.

‘Take up positions,’ said Masayak. ‘Heavy weapons north-east. The rest, cover the approaches.’ He switched to the command vox as the Astral Knights set up the bipods of their heavy weapons overlooking the tangle of generator buildings below. ‘Captain Khabyar,’ said Masayak, ‘we are in position. Send up the slave.’

There had been a great reckoning among the slaves. It had been of little consequence to the Astral Knights, but for the slaves themselves it had been a time of terrible treachery and quick retribution. It quickly became apparent that those who had been reprogrammed by Heqiroth to serve as sleeper agents were missing important parts of their memories – their recollections of their childhoods, loved ones and home worlds were missing whole decades. Under intense questioning the sleeper agents had been discovered and killed. When there was doubt, the suspected were also killed, for there could be no repeat of the betrayal that had contributed to the failure of the assassination mission. Now barely half the slaves the Astral Knights had liberated remained. They followed the ad hoc strikeforces moving across Borsis to stay one step ahead of the necrons, acting as guides and advisors.

The slave assigned to Masayak and Squad Gehesson was a woman named Razdia. She had the tanned skin and wind-sculpted features of a frontierswoman. The slave life had eroded her body and she walked stooped and with a limp as she ascended the tower to join the squad at the top. It was impossible to guess her age – she might have been twenty, she might have been fifty.

‘You worked in Heqiroth’s court,’ said Masayak as Razdia settled down against one of the steel pillars.

‘Sometimes,’ said Razdia. ‘I moved between masters. Mostly I worked maintenance on the

honour guard. I was an agricultural engineer on my home world.'

'And when the court moved?'

'I attended on them a couple of times. We came through here, I remember it very well. I remember the lightning.' Razdia looked down at the industrial sprawl below. 'There,' she said as she pointed, 'running between those towers. It's a twin row of pillars. They don't look like much when they're inactive.'

Masayak followed the woman's gaze and picked out the pillars. They were of uniform height and looked like lightning conductors or radio antennae, but they formed a snaking path around the generator towers and buildings. Razdia had been right. Masayak would have ignored them among the baffling sprawl of the district.

'Take your targets,' said Masayak to the brothers of Squad Gehesson.

'Space them out!' barked Gehesson. 'Section north-east of us, every other pillar! Ghular, target free.'

'Khabyar here,' came the voice of the Ninth Company captain. 'They're approaching. Two minutes.'

'How well armed are they?' asked Masayak of Razdia.

'When I saw them, the court travelled with an honour guard of immortals and lychguard. Twenty of each. And sometimes the Judicator was with them.'

'The Judicator,' said Masayak.

'Metzoi, the leader of the triarch praetorians. They were... bodyguards to the overlord.'

'You sound uncertain.'

'More than bodyguards. I got the impression the triarchs were watching the overlord as much as they were guarding him. And Metzoi was an executioner, too. When a noble fell foul of the overlord, it was Metzoi who was sent to kill them.'

The creature called the Judicator had been mentioned in the fractured vox-captures from Zahiros's failed assassination. 'Then Metzoi shall be destroyed too,' said Masayak.

'The Judicator has been there since long before the current overlord,' said Radzia. 'I don't know if the necrons are really afraid of anything, but if they are, they're afraid of Metzoi.'

'If they do feel fear,' said Masayak, 'they are learning to fear us, as well.'

'Thirty seconds!' came the message over the vox. The battle-brothers squinted down the sights of their heavy weapons – Ghular's heavy bolter, two lascannons and a plasma cannon, each one braced by a bipod and aimed down from the tower.

Lightning siphoned down from the towers and earthed through the rows of pillars. Power sparked from one to the other until they marked out a pathway across the district, weaving between the pylons in two crackling rivers of energy. The high whine of a power source reached Masayak's ears through the endless rumble of the lightning.

The vehicle riding the energy rails approached rapidly. It was about two hundred metres long, composed of dozens of horseshoe-shaped sections. Some supported enormous energy cannons with gauss coils glowing green and blue. Others carried squads of necron warrior-constructs, folded up ready for deployment.

Towards the rear of the train was a section shaped like a raised dais with a throne on which sat a single construct at the controls, with other necrons seated around controlling the various parts of the train. Behind the train was towed a great sphere of ribbed steel, crackling with power.

Sergeant Gehesson held up an auspex scanner, measuring the range from the tower to the approaching train. 'Range!' he yelled. 'Open fire!'

The heavy weapons erupted. Lascannon bolts ripped into the pillars conducting the rails of energy. The plasma cannon spat a volley of liquid energy that bored through the steel rooftops and through another pillar, which toppled in a burst of sparks.

Fire streaked down from the other towers overlooking the energy rails. The Ninth Company's Devastator units had each captured a firing position minutes before, just in time to intercept the transport. The slaves had given the Astral Knights this route – the overlord would head for the place the slaves called the Cathedral of the Seven Moons, where the leaders of Borsis had

weathered noble uprisings and coup attempts in ages past. A direct assault on the place would be futile. The Astral Knights had to intercept the overlord's court before it got there.

The timing had needed to be perfect, and it was. The real tests would soon follow.

The lightning rails winked out of existence as a dozen pillars fell and the power was conducted away into the ground. The front of the train was suddenly unsupported and plunged downwards into the cleft between two of the massive generator buildings. Multicoloured flame burst from a ruptured power coil and segments of the train tumbled free, trailing sparks and flame. Necron bodies were crushed and shattered.

The dais came free and the enthroned necron pilot was thrown clear, vanishing in the downpour of wreckage. The roof of the closest generatorium collapsed under the weight of the debris raining down. The rumble of the crash reached the tower, mingling with the roll of the thunder overhead.

The armoured sphere crunched through into the generator building. It seemed to survive the crash intact, but before the heavy weapons could take aim at it the sphere was gone in a plume of smoke and dust.

'Captain Ifriqi,' voxed Masayak. 'The first stage is achieved. Now the battle lies with you.'

The Seventh Company had taken up their positions around the predicted wreck site, led by Captain Ifriqi in capturing the few areas around the generator building that had been held by necron constructs. Most of the resistance had been worker-constructs, strong but poorly armed for a battle against a company of Astral Knights. The slaves who had laboured in the generator district accompanied them in seizing positions overlooking the streets and canals beneath the energy rails.

The train came down a few hundred metres west of the expected site, almost on top of Ifriqi's own position. Ifriqi's men scattered into overhead cover as the front end of the train erupted through the wall of the generator building, sending a mass of burning wreckage pouring into the cable-choked canals that passed for streets.

Ifriqi led the charge into the burning crash site in person. He was of the most ancient school of leadership, standing at the fore with his power sword raised and the banner of the Seventh Company flying beside him. He led his command squad along with three tactical squads up the slope into the generatorium, towards the immense turbines that were still spinning and pouring arcs of power from their shattered housings. War-prayers and passages from the Codex Astartes blared from the vox-casters carried by the standard bearer.

The first few necrons out of the wreckage were broken and aflame. They were dispatched with a few volleys of bolter fire. A single lychguard led the next wave of a few intact warriors who followed its power blade and glowing shield. Ifriqi's command squad charged at it, and though the standard bearer fell to the lychguard's power blade another took up the standard before it hit the ground. Ifriqi duelled the necron and within moments its severed head was rolling down the slope and the other necrons were being shredded by the volleys of bolter fire streaking through the turbine hall.

The Devastators lent their fire to the unfolding battle from their positions overlooking the generatorium, but as the Astral Knights charged inside their lines of sight were blocked. Masayak led Squad Gehesson down towards street level where they could back up Ifriqi's charge.

Ifriqi was the right man to lead the assault. On Obsidia he had been the finest joustier and most handsome son of the capital city's leading families. It had been inevitable that he would become an Astral Knight, and he took to leadership as if he had been born to it – which, of course, he had. There had never been any question that he would lead his own company one day. When the Chapter Master had made him a captain, it had been the fulfilment of a promise more than an achievement of rank. No one would begrudge him this victory. It was the right of men like him to wear the laurels.

Masayak reached ground level and led Gehesson to the wreck site. The necrons were assembling a resistance in the cover of the turbines and crashed train sections but Ifriqi hit them

again and again, charging, falling back before the necrons could regroup and then hitting them again harder. A few wounded made their way back past Masayak, gauss burns scored deep through their armour, but they were few and the necron destroyed already numbered many more.

From the threshold of turbine hall Masayak could see the armoured sphere that was the Astral Knights' objective. The slaves had spoken of it, and what it contained. It was Overlord Heqiroth's personal chariot, protection against the jealous nobles who might try to storm the transport. It carried the overlord himself and the elite lychguard and triarch praetorians attending him. It looked tough to crack, but not tough enough.

'Set up!' ordered Sergeant Gehesson. The Devastator squad mounted their heavy weapons on chunks of fallen wreckage and sighted at the sphere, across the battlefield where the necrons were being whittled away by Ifriqi's fury. Other Devastator units had also made it to the battlefield and were doing the same, creating a firing line of lascannons and plasma weapons ready to launch a massive wall of fire into their target.

Gehesson glanced at Masayak. 'Where is Turakhin?'

'Probably preparing to betray us,' said Masayak. 'The alien knew we would not need it. Turakhin will be destroyed next. Open fire, sergeant. End this war.'

The Devastator units fired. Bolts of las streaked over the heads of the Astral Knights and necrons fighting in the turbine hall. Missiles followed on plumes of white smoke. Plasma bolts bored into the gilded surface of the sphere.

Sections of the sphere fell away, burning. A crucial support gave way and one side collapsed inwards as if the sphere was suddenly deflated.

'The target is breached!' voxed Masayak.

'I am advancing!' came the reply from Captain Ifriqi. 'He who takes Heqiroth's head shall carry it through the streets of Obsidia! Onward, brethren, for the glory of the fallen!'

The Astral Knights surged forwards. The Devastator units struck their weapons and moved up to support them, stepping over the crushed and scorched necron remains Ifriqi had left in his wake. Masayak could see the banner of the Seventh waving over Ifriqi's position as his command squad led the charge through the depleted necron ranks towards the shattered sphere.

Movement glittered through the tears in the sphere. Heqiroth's last stand was about to begin, when his attendant elites would march out to meet the attackers. They would fail. The Astral Knights had hit too hard and too fast.

A million glittering bodies poured from the sphere in a silver torrent. Suddenly the sphere looked like the egg sac of an enormous spider, giving birth to an uncountable tide of young. The mass of scarabs flowed like water, crashing up against the turbines and rushing through the front ranks of the Astral Knights.

'Hold!' yelled Ifriqi over the vox. 'Back to back, brethren, and stand your ground!'

The Devastator weapons opened fire on the mass of scarabs, but the wave of tiny constructs absorbed the fire with no apparent effect. Ifriqi had led the charge in person, as ever, and he and his command squad were right in the path of the scarab tide. The battle-brother holding the Seventh Company's standard raised the banner high as the squad drew into a tight knot of bodies, ready to fight at all angles. Bolter fire stuttered into the advancing horde but again, the shells were just absorbed by the mass. An individual bolter shell might shatter two or three scarabs – and there might have been millions pouring through the turbine hall.

The tide swept around Ifriqi. Masayak saw the captain slashing around him with his sword, and great wedges of scarabs were vaporised by the flare of the power field. The brothers of his command squad were submerged and swallowed, only Ifriqi himself left to forge upwards and keep his head above the surface. Then he, too, was gone.

There was no vox-communication from Ifriqi's squad now, save for rumbling static and the sound of thousands of mandibles chewing through ceramite.

'Astral Knights, the enemy resorts to perfidy!' called out Masayak over the all-squads channel. 'We shall fall back in good order, and deny them the bedlam they wish to sow among us! Think

to the Codex, brothers, and how the primarch wrote of the battle gone awry! We shall meet it with discipline and honour. The foe will know despair that his gambit has failed.'

Masayak headed across the battlefield towards the retreating squads of the Seventh Company. They needed him there, they needed to see him. While a Chaplain still stood, Space Marines would not fall to disarray. As the brothers of the Seventh Company passed him towards the line of Devastator squads, he saw many of them with scarabs clinging to their armour – they were larger compared to the scarabs elsewhere on Borsis, with longer limbs and oversized mandibles like steel pincers, as if created or evolved specifically to chew through a Space Marine's armour. Many battle-brothers were wounded, with chunks of their armour sawn through and their flesh and bone laid bloodily open. One was carried by two squadmates, both legs devoured below the knee. Another had a bloody spindle of bone in place of a left arm.

It had taken seconds for the trap to be sprung, and for the Astral Knights to be thrown back.

'Heqiroth knew we were coming,' voxed Captain Khabyar.

'So he did,' replied Masayak. 'And so we know where he is.'

Codicier Valqash had been selected to lead the mission. The slaves could not know about it. The rest of the company could not know. Only Masayak, the company captains and the chosen brothers were told of it.

The slaves who had worked in the generatorium district had been separated off and questioned about the route Heqiroth was to take. Life in the district was harsh and short for the slaves who laboured there. Since Borsis had arrived at the Vidar sector those slaves had been human, but the humans liberated by the Astral Knights had described the remains of past slave generations and the strange xenos skeletons they left behind. The human slaves were skinny and weakened by the lightless conditions, and proximity to the turbines meant few had the full complement of fingers and toes.

The slaves had described an underground river below the generatorium district, where industrial effluent was drawn off from the turbine buildings towards a sump deep below the surface of Borsis. The most unfortunate of them had worked down there clearing blockages or dredging lost worker-constructs from the chemical filth. It ran the length of the district, fed by hundreds of channels from every structure.

Sometimes, the river was drained. One old slave remembered it being done to allow a force of lychguard through unseen, to ambush the noble who lorded over the generatorium district during the chaos after the fall of Turakhin. The dry riverbed, pitch-dark and crusted with chemical residue, had allowed the force to emerge from below ground in the heart of the noble's stronghold, and dismantle every warrior-construct within. The slaves had seen it happen but as always, the necrons barely noticed they were there. The necrons forgot the slaves knew.

The principal thrust of the plan to destroy Heqiroth and his court was the derailing of the transport and Ifriqi's assault on the wreck site. But the Codex Astartes explained at great length how no one plan ever encompassed every possibility on any given battlefield. A commander had to have, even if only in the back of his mind, the choices he would make if the reality of the battlefield suddenly changed. Amhrad had communicated that to Masayak when the Chaplain was assigned to the mission, and Masayak had employed Valqash and the veterans of Squad Kypsalah to ensure the Astral Knights would not be completely helpless if Heqiroth had got wind of the ambush.

So it was that Valqash had descended towards the chemical river, and that Turakhin had gone with him.

By the time Masayak reached the maintenance levels below the generatorium, the gunfire had already started. Down here between the foundations of the pylons, the air was ferociously toxic and the filters of Masayak's skull-faced helm could not cut out the stench. The darkness was almost complete and his visual augmentations edged the murk in dark greens and greys. Below the web of support beams and corroded walkways lay the trench of the drained river, a canal with sides encrusted with sticky masses of chemicals.

‘Brother Valqash,’ voxed Masayak. ‘Astral Knights are moving to your position. Report!’
‘It’s down here!’ came the reply, the Codicier’s voice mingling with the crackle of gunfire.
‘Amhrad was right, the transport was a feint!’

‘Then we have the enemy trapped,’ said Masayak. ‘Bring the Emperor’s fury, Brother-Codicier, and we will be at your side!’

Masayak had Squad Gehesson with him. A Devastator squad was ill-suited to the close confines of the generatorium foundations and most had been forced to leave their heavy weapons above ground. Only Brother Ghular still carried his heavy bolter – the others had their boltguns to rely on. Other squads were making their way down but Masayak had taken the fore and he would be the first to link up with Valqash.

That was as it should be. The presence of a Chaplain would give the embattled Astral Knights the greatest swell of confidence when battle-brothers arrived to reinforce them.

Masayak dropped the last distance to the bed of the drained river. A knee-deep layer of corrosive sludge still oozed downstream, and Masayak felt himself slowed as it sucked at his armoured legs. The green glimmer of gauss fire flickered ahead. Masayak activated the power field of his crozius and held it aloft so it shone like a lantern in the darkness, casting the silhouettes of Squad Gehesson across the walls. Here and there corroded necron parts or pitted bones poked from the filth. Rusting scarabs picked through the debris, the mechanical equivalent of a natural world’s lowest scavengers.

Masayak could see a structure straddling the river up ahead – a rusting mass of steel, the remains of a vessel that had sunk while plying the river and become lodged between its walls. Squad Kypsalah was sending out a furious wall of fire into the necrons advancing on them, and in reply volleys of gauss fire were stripping away the decaying matter of the wreck to expose more and more of the squad to the enemy.

Codicier Valqash stood clear of the cover and held out both hands palm-first. A bolt of crimson power lanced into the necron ranks, illuminating for a second the lychguard struck square in the chest. The necron was bored right through and it dropped its power blade and shield as it fell.

Masayak ran as fast as he could through the sucking filth into the cover of the wreck. Squad Gehesson were close behind him and heavy-bolter fire stuttered past him as Ghular fired from the hip.

‘Welcome, brother,’ said Valqash as he ducked back into cover. The armour around his hands and forearms was smoking and blistered with heat. ‘I am glad you could attend. The Overlord of Borsis does not travel light.’

‘Fury shall sweep it away,’ replied Masayak. ‘We have trapped it down here. The fight left in it is no more than its death throes.’

Ahead, a rank of lychguard was approaching. Most advanced with shields held high – others behind them carried two-handed halberds with blades of crystallised power. Bolter fire burst against their shields as they advanced. The sludge underfoot slowed them down, but not as much as it had the Astral Knights. Though some had already fallen to Valqash and Squad Kypsalah, twenty or so of them would reach the Astral Knights position intact.

Beyond the lychguard were the praetorians. They carried a mixture of necron wargear of ornate and ancient appearance, many of them with arm-mounted blasters or glowing staffs that fired glittering streams of gauss fire. Members of Squad Kypsalah displaced, rolling through the chemical swamp, as circular sections of the steel plating in front of them suddenly vanished. Soon, the Astral Knights would have no cover at all.

And behind the praetorians, probably surrounded by a phalanx of yet more necron elites, would be Overlord Heqiroth. To Heqiroth, the truth of the situation was that he had the advantage of numbers and the battlefield, and an impregnable position from which the Astral Knights could not dislodge him. But Masayak rejected that truth. With the determination and skills of the Astral Knights available, there was no reason why Masayak’s truth could not become the new reality.

It took a Chaplain to understand that. It took a Chaplain to fight on when even Space Marines might hesitate, and to show how mutable the truth of battle could be.

‘Feels a lot like we’re the ones who are trapped down here,’ voxed Sergeant Kypsalah.

A dissenting voice was as much a tool of the Chaplain as a devoted follower. ‘Then we shall not remain so,’ said Masayak. ‘We shall advance. Our wrath is the match for their blades! Our steel is a match for their fire!’

Masayak brandished his crozius again and the riverbed lit up in the silver light of its power field. He stood proud of the disintegrating cover, and gauss fire ripped through the air past him. Kypsalah and Gehesson both followed his example and suddenly the Astral Knights were advancing, hammering out chains of bolter fire even as the necrons hesitated in their advance.

An enemy was supposed to cower and die when the lychguard reached them. The praetorians were supposed to stalk the battlefield picking off survivors or runners with gauss fire. The Astral Knights did not follow that script. They obeyed their own reality on this battlefield.

Masayak broke into a run. The battle-brothers around him had no choice but to keep pace. Masayak leapt into combat with the closest lychguard, which raised its shield to block the crozius. Masayak aimed low and the crozius cracked into the lychguard’s knee joint. The necron buckled and sprawled on its back into the corrosive murk. Masayak left it there and rammed the head of the crozius at the midriff of the next lychguard as it brought its halberd down to parry it. The power field shattered the halberd and Masayak followed up with a boot to the chest, knocking the construct back.

Masayak was on top of the lychguard now, bringing his crozius up again and smashing it into the necron’s skull even before the power field had recharged. The necron reeled and Masayak emptied his bolt pistol into the construct – its armour was solid but the point-blank fire cracked its chest open to reveal the glowing mass of components inside. Masayak drew back the crozius again as the power field leapt around it, and rammed the weapon into the necron’s chest cavity. The sudden burst of power blasted the lychguard open from the inside, throwing chunks of its carapace against the river walls as if a grenade had gone off inside it.

‘Nephrekh filth!’ boomed a metallic voice that seemed to fill the river channel to the brim. ‘Down here in your effluent you will suffer!’

The massive crab-like torso of Turakhin crashed down through the supports overhead into the middle of the advancing necrons. One was crushed flat beneath the underside of Turakhin’s hull. Turakhin hurled another lychguard aside with a flick of an armoured leg. The upper hull brought its arm cannon to bear and blasted a fat bolt of gauss energy into the river wall, vaporising a huge bite mark out of it and sending tonnes of rubble pouring into the necrons.

The cannon mounted on the upper body’s head spun its barrels with a high whine. Bolts of power sprayed from it, spiralling through the necron ranks. Another two lychguard were caught in the storm and blasted apart. The praetorians scattered, abandoning their customary economy of movement to seek cover among the trash and wreckage in the channel.

‘A million chances you had to kneel,’ blared Turakhin. ‘To defy the usurper and bow to the rightful Overlord of Borsis. But you chose treachery. You called this death upon yourselves the moment you abased yourselves before the dog Heqiroth!’

Masayak charged through the bedlam, past Turakhin and the scattered lychguard. Past the praetorians would be Heqiroth, perhaps trying to flee Turakhin’s assault. Masayak had to be there to partake in Heqiroth’s destruction. The Astral Knights had to have a hand in the toppling of the Overlord, and a Chaplain would be the most potent symbol of their victory.

The shape of Heqiroth loomed past a scattering of sunken steel plating the praetorians were using for cover. Masayak recognised the fragmented description from Zahiros’s strikeforce and the recollections of the slaves – an oversized, armoured body, nowhere near as huge as Turakhin’s war engine but a walking fortress compared to other necrons, covered in gold and gemstones. Its four legs and the five eyes of its faceplate made the identification a certainty.

A praetorian lurched out of cover, swinging its staff at Masayak’s head. Masayak ducked and parried as the staff was whipped back at him. The praetorian was skilled - it was an elite among elites, and the staff rippled with energy that would have shredded a mundane weapon. But Masayak carried with him the future of his Chapter and victory over Borsis. He could not be held

back by this faceless enemy. Masayak charged a shoulder into the praetorian and knocked it back against the sheet of rotting steel it had been using as cover. He drew back his arm and thrust with the crozius like a rapier, smashing it through the praetorian's faceplate. The back of its gilded skull burst open and Masayak had to use all his strength to pull his arm free again.

Masayak threw the broken necron aside. Fire from Turakhin's cannon sprayed across the river, punching through cover and praetorian construct, stripping chunks of the river wall away around Heqiroth. Heqiroth aimed his staff at Turakhin and fired a glittering crimson whip of energy at the war machine, but it little more than blistered the surface of Turakhin's armoured hull.

The overlord had its back against the crumbling river wall, its lychguard destroyed and overrun and its praetorians scattered. There was nothing between it and destruction now. Masayak had ensured he would be there to strike a killing blow. His duty was done. His truth had become reality.

Inside the cage of Heqiroth's torso squirmed a glossy black mass of scarabs. Heqiroth spread his arms wide and the scarabs scuttled out of his chest, revealing inside not a mass of components but a core of liquid metal, like black mercury held in a rippling sphere.

Masayak advanced, forcing his way through the deep sludge. The scarabs were a last resort but Masayak would not let them slow him down. He had seen how quickly they could disable a Space Marine and though they worked fast, they would not be fast enough.

The liquid metal flowed out around Heqiroth's gilded body, coating it in a caul of shimmering black. He dropped the staff and orb he carried and the four legs that supported his torso, like those of an armoured insect, fell away into the murk. The body rose up higher on a column of the liquid metal that stretched and reformed like something alive.

'Yggra'nya's necrodermis,' came Turakhin's voice, no longer triumphant but an insistent hiss. 'Heqiroth has violated our sacred ground!'

'What sacred ground can there be,' replied Heqiroth in his haughty Low Gothic, 'for the necrontyr? I wear the flesh of the gods, for I alone am holy! You were cast down because you were weak. But I am the god of the necrontyr, and I will rule as a god!'

Heqiroth had risen almost to the ceiling of corroded foundations. Blades of the necrodermis lanced out and speared into the walls of the riverbed, then flexed and hurled Heqiroth towards Turakhin. Heqiroth crashed into Turakhin and the tendrils of living metal lashed around Turakhin's pincer arm. Sparks flew and lubricant spurted as the armour plates around Turakhin's shoulder were forced loose.

Turakhin bellowed with a sound like tearing steel. He swung his upper body and the pincer arm came away, trailing cabling and hydraulic fluid. Heqiroth lost his grip on Turakhin and pitched into the murk, before rising up and crawling along the river wall as his tendrils conveyed him like spider's legs.

'What is this necrodermis?' demanded Masayak.

'The body of Yggra'nya,' said Turakhin. 'Heqiroth has despoiled our sacred places. He has profaned the resting place of the c'tan. It is madness.'

'It is madness,' said Heqiroth, again in Low Gothic so the Astral Knights could understand, 'to lie in a tomb when the galaxy has yet to be won. Did we not slumber so we would wake and return to rule? Is that time not now?'

Heqiroth lashed out with a tendril and batted aside a member of Squad Gehesson who was trying to move through the sludge into the cover of Turakhin's fallen arm. The Astral Knight hit the opposite wall hard enough to bring a hefty slab of it down on top of him.

'What do you fear, Turakhin?' continued Heqiroth as the necrodermis carried him along the ceiling towards Turakhin and the Astral Knights. 'The greenskins? The eldar? The humans and the corpse they worship? This is a galaxy of death and decay. It begs for a conqueror!'

Turakhin's head cannon sprayed fire into Heqiroth. Heqiroth's necrodermis absorbed and flowed around the incoming fire. Brother Ghular ran beneath Heqiroth and poured heavy-bolter fire up into him, but Heqiroth threw the Astral Knight aside with a lash of a tendril.

'Back!' ordered Sergeant Kypsalah. 'Regroup and form up! Gehesson, draw your men back!'

The Astral Knights were retreating from Heqiroth, staying in good order and hammering bolter fire up at the overlord as they moved. Masayak, still in the shadow of Turakhin's war machine body, was out in front. If Heqiroth wanted, he could have snatched the Chaplain up and dashed his brains out against the wall.

Masayak slogged through the sludge and reached the crater in the river wall where Ghular had hit. The Astral Knight was down and moving groggily. His helmet was dented so severely there must have been barely room for his head inside – probably his skull was fractured. Masayak threw Ghular's bulk over his shoulder and carried him out of the fire zone, where Heqiroth's necrodermis blades were falling as rapidly as a silver rain and Turakhin's return fire was sending cascades of rubble falling from the foundations above.

Heqiroth dropped onto Turakhin again and this time got a good grip on the war machine's hull. Tentacles of necrodermis slithered around the lower hull, anchoring the overlord as he punched a spear of living metal through the upper body's chest. An atonal note blared from Turakhin's vox-casters, the braying of a wounded machine. Punctured fuel cells spurted burning fluid, like incandescent blood from Turakhin's wounds.

'Do you think you are the master of Borsis?' demanded Turakhin. 'This world rules you. It cannot be turned from its path. It will carry you to the end and then what will become of you? Do you think what lies on Mars will welcome you as a liberator? It will tear you apart, Heqiroth of Nephrekh! You who have not worshipped it, you who continue to betray its kind, it will destroy you!'

Heqiroth sent out another volley of blades from the necrodermis rippling across his chest. They sheared through the mechanisms of Turakhin's shoulder and his remaining arm fell clear, thudding wetly into the sludge. With a scream of servos, Turakhin's legs buckled under him and he slumped onto the river bed.

'Do you hear, humans?' blared Turakhin. 'Borsis will finish its journey! Your red world will fall! Your blue world will fall! Your race will wither away when my dynasty wakes the Dra—'

Heqiroth formed the necrodermis around his arm into a single huge blade and rammed its point into Turakhin's throat. The head was completely severed, the vox-casters destroyed with it. The head fell into the sludge and sank beneath the surface.

The necrodermis slithered off Heqiroth's body and surrounded the wreck of Turakhin. The war machine struggled, but its motive systems had been ruined and it could do no more than shudder as the silver-black skin completely encased it. The necrodermis contracted, and with a snap of stanchions and a growl of distorted steel Turakhin's body was crushed inside it.

Heqiroth was vulnerable. Masayak turned, ready to drop Ghular and sprint towards the overlord. A good strike with his crozius, and perhaps the skull or the ribcage could be sundered and some vulnerable component revealed. There was still a chance. The overlord could fall. Borsis could fall.

Scarabs leapt from Heqiroth's chest cavity. Three landed on Masayak. He tore one from his face and threw it aside. Another gorged itself on a shoulder pad and the third scuttled up his forearm to chew through the fingers holding his crozius. Masayak let Ghular slide off his shoulder and tore away the scarab on his arm, crushing the wriggling body in his left hand.

The necrodermis had squeezed Turakhin's body to a half of its original size. The shrinking necrodermis provided cover for Heqiroth from the guns of the regrouping Astral Knights, and the remains of his lychguard and praetorian court were advancing past him to re-engage the two depleted squads. There was not long now. Another few moments, and the Chaplain's truth would be proven wrong.

Masayak approached striking distance of Heqiroth. The overlord's construct-body was sturdy enough to make bolt pistol fire irrelevant – Masayak had to use his crozius, and that meant fighting the overlord face to face, as a Chaplain should.

Heqiroth's faceplate split open. Each of his five eyes was revealed to be a gemstone, like a cut ruby. Each one sparked out a flash of light that gathered in front of the overlord's face and coalesced into a single bolt of red fire.

The bolt hit Masayak in the left side of the chest. His armour held but he was picked off his

feet and slammed against the wall behind him. His head spun and white fireworks burst across his eyes. Numbness rippled through him. Darkness crawled into the periphery of his vision and he fought instinctively against unconsciousness.

Masayak closed his hand around his crozius. He had suffered blows like this before. He would live – but only if he got away from Heqiroth.

The necrodermis slithered back over Heqiroth's construct-body. What remained of Turakhin had been crushed to a knot of compressed metal no larger than a man.

A sub-limb unfolded from Heqiroth's forearm. In its gilded fingers was held a small cube of polished metal which unfolded like a silver flower. Hieroglyphics glowed on its petals as blue-white streaks of information were dragged from Turakhin's remains and into the cube. Everything that constituted the being named Turakhin was crushed into wreckage or imprisoned as the petals folded back up, and Masayak thought he could hear a distant scream shivering through the immense structure of Borsis.

Codicier Valqash appeared above Masayak, hands outstretched. A ray of crackling power scored a deep charred furrow across the necrodermis covering Heqiroth's face. Heqiroth darted back as the necrodermis reformed over the wound, and the second that bought Valqash was enough for the Codicier to grab Masayak under the arms and haul him through the sludge towards the remaining Astral Knights.

Some had fallen. Gauss fire and necrodermis blades had cut them down. Brother Ghular lay where Masayak had left him, unconscious, sinking into the sludge. One of Squad Kypsalah – Masayak could not see enough to identify him – had lost one arm and a good chunk of his torso, burned away by gauss fire that still licked across the torn flesh and ceramite.

Painkillers pumped into Masayak's bloodstream. Kypsalah was giving the order to fall back. Another Astral Knight from Squad Gehesson was speared through the faceplate by a blade of necrodermis.

The darkness was more complete the further Valqash dragged Masayak. It was only when he noticed he could not hear that he realised he was falling unconscious.



Addendum Auxiliary

A sub-categorisation was again detected by this functionary and investigated as before. The autoseance subject had once more isolated the secondary memory and compartmentalised it such that it could be perceived as a discrete entity within the contiguous contact. The techniques for doing so are beyond this functionary's understanding and as such represent a level of psyniscience beyond that of the Scholastica Psykana.

The sub-memory has been recorded here as before.



TEN

Chaplain Masayak

The Astral Knights had descended as one. To the hivers, there was only one of them, an armoured giant that erupted from every doorway and window at once, that charged down every street, that turned a gun or a chainblade on every citizen at the same time.

There had been one scream, too, ripped from a million throats. This district reached down from the skyward slopes of Hive Tertius to the border with the underhive, a vertical slice of industrial tangle home to slightly more than a million souls. Every one of them was presumed corrupted down to his or her genetics, carrier of a subtle mutation that could not be permitted to survive. It would devour Hive Tertius and then the whole of Varvenkast, and eventually, as always happened no matter how thorough a quarantine, would make it off-world to begin the cycle again on some other Imperial planet.

The Astral Knights were the only way that cycle would be broken, and they had already begun to do it as Chaplain Masayak kicked open the hinged cover of the drainage pipe and emerged into the main factory floor.

‘Spread out,’ ordered Captain Vo’hel, the gruff and broad-faced officer to whom Chapter Master Derelhaan had given responsibility for this section of the afflicted district. ‘Stay in contact. If you are lost down here, you will have to find your own way back.’

Two squads moved up on either side of Masayak. Even as he drew his bolt pistol the first mutants were falling. They were the workers on the factory floor, thousands of them lined up along the assembly conveyors to work on the precision cogitator components for which this district was known. Masayak knew well how ordinary, unaugmented people reacted to the sudden onset of danger. They did not react at all, sometimes for ten seconds, sometimes for sixty. Most kept working, fearful that if they left their posts or interrupted the production line they would be punished or humiliated.

The mutants stood and gawped as the Astral Knights levelled their bolters at them. Masayak saw the coveralls with the coloured trim indicating the vast majority of these people were from Varvenkast’s void caste, those of stock that had been on the planet for a generation or less. Only after several generations of residence and service to the social system of this world could their descendants be born into a caste that might afford them habitations with light or hot water, or the prospect of one day working somewhere other than the manufactoria floors.

Not that these people would have any descendants.

It was a point of pride that no one citizen should require more than a single shot. That was what twenty of the workers got in the first volley, twenty bodies ripped open by twenty bolter shells, falling back onto the conveyors and being dragged up into the machinery to be stamped or twisted to unrecognisable shapes.

People were starting to scream. Most were stunned by the gunfire and the sudden sprays of blood across their faces.

‘Give thanks,’ said Masayak, his voice amplified through the carved teeth of his skull-faced helm, ‘for we are swift.’

Some were running now. They were shot down next. One vaulted up onto a bank of machinery and Masayak shot him through the small of the back with his bolt pistol – the man

was dead before he hit the ground.

Other Astral Knights squads were moving in from other directions. Those who fled upwards would meet the taskforce led by Derelhaan himself, moving down through the district. Those who headed down would hit the force coming up from the underhive, led by Captains Ifriqi and Koledos. Those who fled sideways, trying to reach the neighbouring districts, would find their fellow hivers had barricaded every passageway and thoroughfare. There was no way out. There could not be. This was a cull of a mutant bloodline, and they all had to die.

The Astral Knights advanced through the manufactorum floor, over the conveyor and through into the workers' quarters. Here, in identical chambers set side by side like a stack of shipping containers, the people of the district spent the scant hours when not working. It looked like nothing so much as the cell block of a prison. Thousands of similar blocks housed the great majority of the district's people, and likewise the bulk of the Astral Knights' work would be done in places like this.

The squads split up, each taking a different level of the block, and then into ones and twos to cleanse a particular corridor or junction. At these close confines, it was expected that a combat knife or a bare fist would do the job. Two brothers moved ahead of Masayak, kicking the doors off their hinges and killing whoever they found inside. No kill took more than three seconds.

Masayak glanced into the ruptured doorways. Each cell was of the same dimensions, with a bed and toilet. The workers ate communally, in long, low mess halls already being sanitised by other squads. What they did most in their cells, other than sleep, was pray. Each one had cheap painted icons and pages from holy books on the walls, or a framed portrait of a saint propped up on a packing crate as a homemade shrine.

There was nothing so foul as the heretic who wore a disguise of piety.

The foreman's quarters were ahead, branching off from the main cell block. The two Astral Knights ahead took another branch of the cell block and left the foreman's quarters for Masayak. Masayak shouldered open the double doors.

Inside was a rather grander suite. Several rooms branched off from a reception hall dominated by a bronze statue of Governor Rheydolmar. False stairways led up to framed oil portraits of Hive Tertius aristocrats. Masayak kicked through a door leading to a dining hall, with a long table laid with gold and silverware – it was empty. The bedchamber, with a curtained four-poster bed and endless layers of dark red upholstery, was also abandoned.

At first glance the trophy room looked inhabited only by the stuffed animals glowering in their glass cases – a shaggy, horned quadruped from Varvenkast's frozen tundra, a creature something like a snake with a dozen clawed legs fringing its long spiral body, a pair of birds with hunched vulture-like heads and plumage of silver blades. But Masayak caught movement behind a wooden display case showing off hundreds of glittering insects and butterflies. He drew his crozius, not bothering to activate the power field.

Behind the case was a man. He was elderly, with a neatly trimmed greying beard and a more elaborate version of a workman's uniform. One of his eyes had been replaced with a functional bionic of lenses and brass cogs. His uniform had a high collar and leather ruff, and coloured panels that echoed the slashed sleeves of a hive spire noble.

'Stop,' the man gasped. 'You do not know. You have been used! We are...'

Masayak closed the distance with the foreman in half a stride. He cracked his crozius into the side of the blasphemer's head and heard the neck snap. The foreman toppled full length on the floor, his head twisted at an impossible angle and the side of his skull caved in. Blood already spread across the wood panels of the floor.

The man had been reaching for something in his uniform. The front of it was hanging open and the man's fingers had not quite stopped spasming. Masayak assumed the glint of metal was a weapon with which the foreman had hoped to defend himself.

It was not. It was a symbol of polished metal, hanging around the foreman's neck. The symbol was of a shark, curved over into a circle. In the centre of that circle was an owl gripping a lightning bolt.

Masayak had seen it before. He had seen it flying from a banner over Port Exalt.

The shark, owl and bolt stood for daring, wisdom and fury.
The symbol of House Janiak of Obsidia.



Addendum Personal

Is it possible to know anyone more completely than by experiencing his memories?

I knew my family. I could anticipate their actions and sometimes guess at their thoughts. Those with whom I trained in service to the Holy Ordos of the Inquisition were close to me too, for we had to be close if we were to succeed – sometimes, to survive.

But I have never been as close to anyone as I have to the body lying on its slab in the autoseance suite. I have never spoken to this man. I have never spoken to any one of his kind, and if I was presented with a living Space Marine in the flesh I would be as likely to flee as to try to strike up a conversation. But I have been inside this man's memory. Though I have found plenty in there that did not come from him, I also know I have seen through his eyes and let his thoughts into my mind.

I will never speak to him. I have not even confirmed his identity. And while I have performed autoseance procedures on individuals about whom I knew much more, I have never experienced their memories with such immediacy and intensity as I have during these sessions. My previous contacts have been seen as if through a distance or during an ever-present fog. Sounds have been muffled and each sensation experienced as if through a thick layer of clothing. But these sessions, they have been real.

I have experienced a bullet punching right through me. I know what it feels like to bleed to death. When it comes to the memories of the subject himself, I know what it means to have all those experiences crammed within me until my mind is full to bursting. I have felt my skull strain at the seams as if it was about to break and all those memories pour out in a crimson flood.

In recuperating from these last sessions, I have felt less and less like Kalliam Helvetar and more like an empty vessel into which has been poured the substance of countless others. Kalliam is just one of those people. A far greater presence is the autoseance subject himself. I know him better than I do the woman named Kalliam. Could he come to completely subsume her, so I remember nothing about her and do not experience what she feels or thinks? Is that one of the many risks of the autoseance, which no one fully understands?

Perhaps this autoseance will end me, but not through my heart stopping or my brain haemorrhaging. Instead I will simply cease to exist and another mind will think and feel in place of mine. It would be a curious sort of death. Perhaps no one will notice. It would be my duty to accept it, just as if it was by sword or fire, in the pursuit of the Inquisition's purpose.

But for all I claim to know and accept the consequences of my duty, I am scared of what will happen to me. I wish I knew no fear as the Space Marines did. I know how that feels, too, for the memories I have experienced have considered fear to be an alien thing, an invasion of the soul like possession by a spirit, and I can begin to understand how Space Marines do the things they do. It is one of the few comforts I can take from the contacts I have made, and when I have awoken and am Kalliam Helvetar again, that comfort is gone. Kalliam knows fear. She knows it very well.

My time of prayer and remaking has come to an end. After I have cleansed my body and completed the mental exercises in preparation, I shall attempt primary contact again. I am very deep now. I do not think this subject has much more for me. I sense there is much he keeps locked up, even in death choosing what I can and cannot see. His is a mind of the most extraordinary discipline, and dying did not change that. I am full of admiration for him, but I am horrified when I think of what he must have done to his mind to make it possible.

I know him better than I know myself, but there is an ocean of memories he chooses not to give to me. I am used, I am thwarted, I am terrified, by this mind. And though I can make some guesses, I am not even completely sure of his name.



ELEVEN

Brother Kodelos

What beauty Borsis had could only be appreciated from the air.

From the cockpit of the gunship *Maxentius*, Borsis was a crazed sculpture of steel, like an immense metallic expanse scrimshawed by a divine silversmith into a pattern too complex to reproduce. The features of the planet had been hurriedly named as the Astral Knights encountered them, and this area had been dubbed the Labyrinth Wastes. It was a stretch of iron plains carved deep with interlocking canals that served no apparent purpose save to form an impenetrable maze stretching between the horizons.

Perhaps it was indeed a maze, and served as a defence to discourage besieging of the structure at the centre of the Labyrinth Wastes. The slaves called it the Cathedral of the Seven Moons. From the cockpit of the *Maxentius*, Brother Kodelos could see why. Seven gleaming silver orbs circled around the peak of a great mountain-like structure, a cluster of pinnacles growing in height towards the centre until the tallest spire reached past the orbiting spheres and touched the lowest edge of Borsis's cloud layer. The whole cathedral had the shape of a pyramid covered in spines, as if it was an enormous creature preparing for a predator's bite by sprouting hundreds of quills. Where everything around it was grey metal, the Cathedral of the Seven Moons was plated in ivory panels with flashes of the purple and sea green of the Nephrekh dynasty.

The spheres slowly orbited the peak of the cathedral, and Kodelos could make out sensor arrays and banks of lenses mounted on the polished curves of their surfaces. They were observatories, always peering through the cloud into the void. The Cathedral of the Seven Moons was the eye of Borsis.

'I see troops massing along the southern edge,' said Kodelos's co-pilot, Brother Phaleron. Phaleron had lost the upper half of his face, and seemingly his capacity for joy and sense of humour, in a fuel leak and fire ten years before. His twin bionic eyes were plugged directly into the gunship's control console, taking in the stream of information from its sensors. 'Numbering three to five hundred. Support walkers and anti-grav artillery among them.'

'Relay it to the strikeforce command,' said Kodelos.

Glowing runes were projected onto the cockpit's windows, overlaying the view with tactical information. Hundreds of red blips lit up around the cathedral's threshold – the necrons streaming out of the cathedral, identified and tagged by the gunship's cogitator. The gunship had been forged on Mars in an age when the more complex marks of cogitators were still being manufactured. The machine-spirit of the gunship was agile and intelligent, and proved able to take in and calculate battlefield data far more quickly than a Space Marine. They did not make them like that any more – they had not for several thousand years. Kodelos found himself hoping the *Maxentius* would make it off Borsis. The Imperium had the capacity to create new Space Marines, but when the *Maxentius* was gone, there would never be another.

'You're coming in over our position,' voxed Captain Khabyar from below. The captain of the Ninth was in overall command of the strikeforce. 'I trust your mission was successful?'

'They were delivered intact,' replied Kodelos. 'But very uneventfully. Not nearly enough mayhem.'

‘Then you will be glad to know,’ said Khabyar, ‘the enemy have all chosen to greet us at once.’

‘How honoured we are,’ said Kodelos. ‘I am glad we chose to return the favour.’

‘Stay high and keep your eyes down,’ said Khabyar. ‘I need your intelligence for the moment, not your guns. I will tell you when that changes.’

‘Understood, brother-captain.’ Kodelos could see the column of Astral Knights moving across the Labyrinth Wastes, directed through the dense steel canyons by their auspex scanners and by the topographical maps being sent to them by the *Maxentius*’s machine-spirit. From this height they were no more than insects with white carapaces. That distant, tiny hint of movement represented the pride of Obsidia, the Emperor’s finest, thousands of years of glory, sacrifice and war.

The Astral Knights were making their last move of the war on Borsis. They were attacking Overlord Heqiroth in his stronghold, the Cathedral of the Seven Moons. They were ending this fight one way or another. All of them.

‘Best of luck, my prince,’ voxed Captain Khabyar.

Kodelos had been addressed as that many times among the Astral Knights, always in that same mocking tone. And he always gave the same reply.

‘Same to you, peasant.’

The lightning rail had demonstrated to the Astral Knights the existence of mass transit on Borsis. It was the means by which the necrons had moved their contingents of warrior-constructs around the districts of the planet. Some of the slaves had been taken by the lightning rails from one set of labours to the next, and were able to lead a team accompanied by Techmarine Sarakos to one of the interchange stations. Amhrad had given orders for Sarakos to seize control of the lightning rails. It did not need to be permanent, only long enough for the various strikeforces to converge. Sarakos worked fast, and Borsis’s transport system was under the invaders’ control for as long as it took the necrons to respond. That was all the time Amhrad’s plan needed.

The orders went out across the vox to the surviving Astral Knights commanders. Khabyar and the force fighting its way out of the generatorium district, the stragglers making it out of the necropolis, the various knots of Astral Knights moving and fighting independently and the officers of Amhrad’s own strikeforce – they all knew what the orders signified. This was their last shot. They would return from this operation victorious, or they would not return at all. Amhrad had learned from the slaves who betrayed Zahiros’s mission. He kept the reasoning behind the operation to himself. Most of the Astral Knights guessed it, but they did not discuss it. There seemed no point. They had their orders, and they all knew what had to be done.

They were to get to the closest lightning rail and ride it, with Sarakos controlling from afar, to the edge of the Labyrinth Wastes. They were to muster at the wastes under Khabyar’s command, and with Kodelos directing them from overhead march to the gates of the Cathedral of the Seven Moons.

Then, they were to kill Overlord Heqiroth.

Whether Heqiroth’s dying would deliver the destruction of Borsis or whether it was to be done for simple revenge, the Astral Knights did not question. Their Chapter Master had spoken. They had their orders.

‘Two red at four,’ said Brother Phaleron. He need not have said anything – the threat icons of the *Maxentius* were bathing the cockpit in flickering red and the runes projected onto Kodelos’s retina depicted twin flashing daggers approaching the gunship from the side.

‘Banking,’ said Kodelos. ‘Evading low. Get a lock, use missiles.’

The *Maxentius* dropped out of the air, thrusters burning just long enough to arrest its fall above the surface of the Labyrinth Wastes. The Astral Knights directly below scattered and instinctively aimed their bolters at the sky. Kodelos got his first glimpse of the enemy as twin crescent-shaped shadows arrowing across the maze-work, banking and peeling off as they

streaked past the *Maxentius*.

'The sky is yours no more, alien,' said Kodelos. He gunned the main engines and the *Maxentius* leapt off, arcing around to bring the enemy fighters into visual range.

The fighters were of similar design to the craft that had spiralled up at the *Tempestus* from the surface of Borsis, but smaller and more streamlined for agility in atmospheric flight. The middle sections swivelled freely between the curved wings, and around the central cluster were arrays of gauss blasters with their charged coils trailing lashing arcs of green energy.

There were no viewscreens or cockpits. These fighters had no pilots. They were constructs, like the skeletal warriors who waited in their thousands on the battlements.

Targeting runes flickered across Kodelos's vision as Phaleron and the gunship's cogitator locked onto the necron fighters. Kodelos felt the gunship shuddering around him as the missiles were shunted into the launchers. The launchers slid from the undersides of the *Maxentius* and the gunship tried to yaw out of control as the sudden air resistance dragged it back.

Three missiles streaked out of the gunship, drawing glowing contrails across the sky. A volley of dense gauss fire hurtled back, ripping past the gunship as Kodelos wrenched the controls and the *Maxentius* tumbled down out of the line of fire.

'I am Prince Kelvanah Kodelos Ban Rehannian,' said Kodelos, a mantra that was as automatic to him as pulling a trigger or taking the yoke of the aircraft. 'I am ready to die.'

Kodelos directed *Maxentius* below the level of the ravine, flying the gunship down it as fast as he could drive it and still retain control. Gauss fire burst and hammered against the lip of the ravine and shards of fragmented metal pinged and boomed against the hull.

'Pull up,' said Phaleron. 'We're too low.'

'They'll shoot us down,' said Kodelos. 'We are one. They are two. Make them chase us.'

More lights flashed and alarms chimed. 'Two hits,' said Phaleron.

A moment later the broken shape of one necron fighter careened off the canyon wall just ahead. It flipped and spun as the power coils of its gauss weapons fractured and spilled a sudden wash of glowing liquid energy, eating through the steel ravine wall so quickly it had dissolved down to the canyon floor by the time the *Maxentius* hurtled past. The gunship shuddered with the secondary explosions that filled the canyon behind with blue-green fire.

This was how it had been across the Bokrund Heights a hundred years ago. Kodelos had heard the tales from his grandfather. Men had taken to the skies in flimsy constructions of steel and silk, firing repeater railguns at their enemies among the clouds. They were doomed men who took the defence of their name and their homeland as a personal responsibility, and sought death and honour duelling in the sky. Kodelos had dreamed of it, and those dreams had become suspended in his blood and remade him as a knight of the sky. His bloodline was horrified at the idea of their first and best son taking flight and risking everything up there – but then, they had never been forced to watch him do it. The Astral Knights had come to the palace before then, and taken him to the fortress-monastery where they made him a prouder knight even than those fearless men of Obsidia's past.

This was how it had been. Battle at the speed of thought. Life and death, honour and failure, in less time than it took to blink. Pure conflict, distilled and raw. Kodelos's hearts were filled with it. He had been born for many things, but above all, he had been born for this.

Through the billows of flame the second fighter arrowed. Another glittering spray of gauss fire shimmered out from its central cluster, shooting past the *Maxentius*. Damage control warnings flashed.

'Port control vanes gone,' said Phaleron.

The necron fighter hurtled overhead, rising up into the sky above the Labyrinth Wastes, hanging for a moment at the apex of its climb and dropping back down again for another pass.

'He's faster,' said Kodelos. He felt his jaw tighten as he focused everything he had on keeping the *Maxentius* weaving through the narrow labyrinth canyons, yanking it into right-angle turns and slewing sideways around the tighter bends.

The necron fighter was an interceptor craft. It was fast enough to keep pace with anything the Imperium had in a dogfight. But that meant it had to go fast – it couldn't slow down or hover in

place like the *Maxentius* could. It could not stay on the gunship's tail in the confines of the labyrinth because its minimum speed forced it to overshoot the gunship after a few seconds.

It cut down the necron's opportunities of attack. Kodelos flew as fast as he could to keep the gunship as slippery as possible, jinking and sliding out of the necron's sights, but it was still slow enough that the necron was restricted to second-long bursts of fire before it had to rise back up out of the canyon to loop down again for another pass.

'We're coming up on the target,' said Phaleron. 'Turn back.'

Kodelos realised the *Maxentius* was almost at the threshold of the Cathedral of the Seven Moons. The structure probably bristled with anti-aircraft gauss weapons. He needed to keep well away from the mountainous structure.

'Two hostiles, high,' said Phaleron. More runes and warnings flashed up, too many for Kodelos to keep track of. A lifetime of training and sleep-doctrination took over and he entered a state where his mind instinctively noted what was important and abandoned everything else. Some of the data coming his way – the weaponry indicators, damage control, fuel, targeting – could be left to Phaleron. Much of it – altitude and attitude gauges, navigation – he could ignore completely. He flew entirely by eye and took in only the indicators of his enemies' location.

Two more necrons joined the first on their attack run. Kodelos threw the *Maxentius* into a sharp turn that took it down a narrow ravine over which ran a bridge of steel. The warrior-constructs on the bridge were marching to join the defence of the cathedral. They turned their gauss rifles towards the *Maxentius* as the gunship streaked under the bridge.

Gauss cannon fire from the pursuing fighters hammered into the bridge and pocked the canyon walls. Maybe some of the warrior-constructs had even been caught in the blast. The necrons did not seem the kind of xenos that cared greatly about dissolving a few of their own to get at the enemy. The third fighter was more accurate and Kodelos felt the gunship buck underneath him and jump around at the controls, as if it was suddenly lighter.

'Fuel breach,' said Phaleron. 'Full loss.'

The damage control system activated pict screens on the console that showed the damage. A gauss shot had eaten clean through the side of the gunship and into the fuel tank that straddled the fuselage. The last drops of the viscous fuel were spraying from the tear.

'Bring us down,' said Phaleron.

'They'll strafe us,' said Kodelos. 'We need something overhead.'

The *Maxentius* could stay in the air for a minute or so. It had to be on the ground by then, but not somewhere the enemy fighters could swoop down on it at their leisure. A cave or an overhang where the *Maxentius* could skid to a halt without exposing itself to attack from overhead. There had to be something like that in the winding canyons of the Labyrinth Wastes.

More fire. Kodelos spun the gunship down a ravine that zigzagged crazily. He felt the manoeuvring thrusters weakening under him as he jinked through each turn.

They could not keep him moving for more than a few seconds, not like this.

The gunship rounded a corner, juddering on failing columns of exhaust, and the massive front face of the cathedral loomed past the bend. This close Kodelos could see the hundreds of towers that made up the cathedral, increasing in height towards the centre to form a mountain of steel spears covered in lights and engraved hieroglyphs. An army of warrior-constructs clustered around the towering gatehouses in a carpet of glittering steel.

The shadows of the orbiting moons passed over the gathered necrons. Kodelos could almost feel the thousands of xenos eyes turned towards the *Maxentius*. A shard of shadow broke off and rippled across the sea of metal skulls. Kodelos glanced up to see the necron fighters swooping down past the nearest moon, breaking off to come at the *Maxentius* from three directions.

A leader – a true leader, not just one with the right bloodline and medals – made decisions quickly and stuck by them. He did not turn back on them. He did not weigh up all the possible answers until the crisis had grown past the point of solving. Kodelos had been taught that in the halls of his fathers and at the feet of the best tutors on Obsidia. And when the battle-lore of the Codex Astartes told him much the same thing, Kodelos knew it to be true. The decision he

made then was to point the *Maxentius* downwards, into the maw of the closest canyon opening, and force every remaining drop of fuel through the main engines.

There was no landing safely. There was no hovering in place and shooting back. Trying to do either – or worse, both – would invite the necrons to riddle the *Maxentius* with so much gauss fire there would likely be nothing left but scattered atoms. The only choice was to crash, and so Kodelos made that choice.

Gauss fire punched through the body of the *Maxentius*. Part of the payload detonated and the rear of the gunship was blasted clean off. The cold, damp air of Borsis whistled through the cockpit. The engines sputtered and died.

The canyon wall hurtled past. The control surfaces and thrusters were gone and Kodelos had no say over how the *Maxentius* fell. It slammed into the wall and bounced off, Kodelos's head snapping from side to side with such force he thought his neck would break and he would be dead before he hit the ground.

The *Maxentius* landed on its side. The cockpit was crushed against the ground and Phaleron vanished in a welter of crumpled metal. Fire and sparks spurted as the gunship skidded along the pitted steel ground. Kodelos could see nothing but random light and motion, feel nothing but his body being hammered from every direction, hear nothing but a deafening scream of steel on steel.

The thought cut through everything, as if it was stamped onto his brain and all the bedlam of the crash could not drown it out:

I am Prince Kelvanah Kodelos Ban Rehannian. I am ready to die.

That was the question his grandfather had asked him when he was taken to the battlements of the palace for the ritual of his majority. Was he ready to die? He had said he was, of course. And he had meant it. The Astral Knights Chaplain had asked it of him when Kodelos was presented to him. His mother had pleaded with the Chaplain not to take their young prince – he was born to one day rule over half of Obsidia, not die fighting an alien war light years away. But his uncles had demanded her silence, and Kodelos had answered that he was ready to die that very moment if it was the will of the Emperor and the requirement of his duty.

I am ready to die.

If Kodelos had been knocked unconscious, it had not been for long. Perhaps he had been awake through the whole crash. Perhaps ten minutes had gone by, or maybe a few seconds. Kodelos could not tell.

Again, the lessons of the duelling hall and the Codex took over. Without thinking about it Kodelos was clambering out of the ruined cockpit, through the shattered windshield and out across the nose. Smoke was pouring around him and heat was pulsing up from the hull underneath. Fire was already rushing up from the shattered stern of the gunship towards the front.

Kodelos jumped down onto the ground as the fire flowed through the cockpit and over the nose. He ran to the relative safety of an overhang he was vaguely aware reached out above him. He passed out of the zone of heat around the crashed gunship and, as if recognising the immediate threat was gone, his mind returned to him the responsibility for making decisions along with the full range of his senses.

Kodelos realised his twin hearts were hammering. He ordered them to be calm. He forced his breathing to do the same. His armour was scorched and dented, especially his left shoulder guard which had been almost turned inside out, but he could feel no broken bones or ruptured organs. What pain he felt was the good kind. The bruised and wrenched joints that told him everything was still working.

The *Maxentius* had come to rest in a shallow cave in the canyon wall that looked like it had occurred naturally through centuries of corrosion. The steel was pitted and crumbling underfoot and gritty metal stalactites hung down overhead. The wreck was still burning, but with its fuel and payload gone there was nothing to explode. Beyond the cave there was one bend in the canyon before the area immediately around the Cathedral of the Seven Moons. And, of course,

the thousands of necron warriors who had seen him crash.

A shape stumbled towards Kodelos, silhouetted in the flame. Kodelos recognised the shape of power armour even as his hand went to the bolt pistol at his side.

‘Phaleron!’ shouted Kodelos. ‘I was sure I had seen you die!’

‘I was thrown clear, Brother Kodelos,’ said Phaleron. Phaleron was one of the few Astral Knights who had never sarcastically addressed him as ‘prince’.

‘Here we fight,’ said Kodelos. His bolt pistol was already in his hand – Phaleron’s sidearm was an Adeptus Astartes-pattern shotgun of the type carried by the Chapter’s Scout units. Phaleron had done well to keep it on him during the crash. ‘The xenos will have seen us come down here. They will be after us.’

‘Then our duty is to make them pay dearly for our deaths,’ said Phaleron.

It could have been a quote from the Codex Astartes. Maybe it was – Phaleron had much of it memorised.

Power coils sizzled and flames licked from the torn wreck. ‘Brother,’ said Kodelos as he watched the gunship burn. ‘Our steed is slain. We are disarmed. How can our duty be done now?’

He was surprised to hear the words himself. They had come without him willing them. But they were true. Kodelos’s duty was to fight the Astral Knights’ battles in the air, dogfighting with enemy interceptors, strafing hostile troops, relaying information. Since he had earned his power armour, that was how he had fought – from above, in the cockpit of the *Maxentius*. Now the *Maxentius* was gone.

‘We do our duty as the Codex demands,’ said Phaleron. There was no inflection in his voice.

‘How do I fight?’ said Kodelos. ‘I was ready for my duty to kill me, brother. I would not be an Astral Knight if I was not. But I was supposed to die in the air! I should have died in a fireball above us or in the crash. Not on the ground, naked like this.’

‘We take the deaths we are given,’ said Phaleron. ‘We must make do with the galaxy’s choice of fate. Maybe a prince of Obsidia is not used to making do.’

Kodelos stared at Phaleron. It was the first time his battle-brother had even mentioned Kodelos’s status back on their home world. He was not sure if it was Phaleron’s words that had taken him aback, or the fact they might be true.

The sounds of steel footsteps on steel reached Kodelos and he snapped out of his thoughts. Necron constructs were rounding the corner in the ravine outside the cave. Most were the basic warrior-constructs, but they were backed up by immortals toting their double-barrelled gauss cannon.

‘They did not take long,’ said Phaleron. ‘Now is not the time for doubt, Brother Kodelos. Give yourself to your anger. Fight and die. Give thanks our task is so simple.’

Kodelos did not have time for a reply. Gauss fire streaked past the wreck and burst against the rear wall of the cavern. Stalactites were sheared from the ceiling. Kodelos slid into the cover of the wreck, the heat from the burning steel hammering against him. Phaleron took cover at the cockpit end, glancing over the crumpled nose at the advancing constructs.

Kodelos could see through the torn hull of the *Maxentius*, where the gunship’s passenger compartment had been carved straight through by fire from the necron fighter craft. The warrior-constructs were firing to keep the Astral Knights’ heads down while the immortals advanced behind them, silently waiting for their chance to open fire and finish the fight.

Kodelos sniped a couple of bolt pistol shots. One shot rang off the side of a warrior-construct’s skull and the construct fell, but a few seconds later it clambered back to its feet with one eyepiece burned out. More gauss fire stripped away the other side of the *Maxentius*, boring through cover that became less and less secure with every second.

He had learned to shoot among his uncles, who considered the ability to hunt the true measure of a man and essential for anyone who would one day wear the Threefold Crown of Obsidia. They knew better than to try to stop him from flying, for he would one day have the power to promote or execute them at will, but they made sure he was well versed in the traditional pursuits of House Kelvanah. And the young Kodelos could shoot.

Another couple of shots brought down the damaged necron, punching through its neck and severing its metallic skull from its shoulders. Kodelos heard Phaleron reloading his shotgun, replacing the close-ranged fragmentation shells with solid slugs, followed by a trio of shots that hammered into the chest of another construct and blew its torso open. It clattered to the ground and though it was not deactivated, some crucial component was shattered and it could only drag itself along the ground with one twitching arm.

It was not like hunting. Then the prey fell and stayed still, and was picked up by a retriever hound or one of the house staff when the shooting was done. The constructs could take a bolter wound and get up again, and when one did stay still there was always another construct behind it ready to take its place.

These were the doubts of a child, thought Kodelos as he took aim again and let the old warrior instincts depress the trigger. He had not felt this way since the Astral Knights had sent him out to bring back the head of a mutant from the equatorial jungles, armed only with a combat knife. Then he had been dizzied by the break from the court of House Kelvanah, and the suddenness with which he had been thrown into a world of danger and privation. He felt like that now, as if it were only yesterday he had been the centre of a prince's world.

No, it was not his life on Obsidia that had gone. It was his life in the cockpit of the *Maxentius*. That was what had been torn away so suddenly. He wasn't a pilot any more, duelling in the sky. He was just like everyone else.

The immortals were in range. Cannon fire shredded the side of the ruined gunship. In a few seconds half the wreck was gone and what remained was a crumbling mass of holes held together by strips of dissolving rust.

The warriors reached the wreck. One clambered on top to fire down at the two Astral Knights. Phaleron blasted its central mass apart with two shotgun rounds. Another rounded the nose and Phaleron smacked it down with the butt of the shotgun. Kodelos shot the construct through the skull and pivoted to put another three bolt-shells into the body of another lurching past the gunship's stern.

There were too many. Even if every shot was a kill, the warrior-constructs would kill the Astral Knights before the immortals even got the chance.

This was not the death the Astral Knights had promised Prince Kelvanah Kodelos Ban Rehannian. Not this pointless butchery. His duty was not done.

And he was on the ground, dying for nothing in a skirmish that won no plaudits and contributed to no victory. This was not a Space Marine's death.

Brother Phaleron wrestled a warrior-construct to the ground but in doing so his back was exposed. Another construct levelled its gauss blaster and fired a bolt of green energy right through the backpack of Phaleron's armour, stripping out a core of ceramite right down to the back of his ribcage. A second shot punched the rest of the way through and Phaleron slumped on top of the fallen construct. His hearts, lungs and spine had been obliterated. He was dead.

Kodelos backed away from the wreck as the constructs marched forward. Gauss fire streaked past him. One bolt clipped his shoulder guard and he felt hot pain there where it stripped away a furrow of skin and muscle. Kodelos was firing but it was not a conscious decision to pull the trigger or swap out a new magazine when the hammer fell on an empty chamber.

His mind was full of the futility of his death. Phaleron was gone, but Space Marines fell in battle. He was not the first on Borsis and he would definitely not be the last. But Kodelos had been marked out for a greater purpose. Was that not why the Emperor had seen him born into the line of House Kelvanah's princes? Why he had been endowed with the skill and willpower required by an Astral Knight? How could all that be a coincidence, if he was just to die here in this cave like a rat instead of in the sky in a glorious fireball, his sacrifice the keystone of victory?

He had never let those thoughts take full form within his mind before. He had never dared. But now he could not hold them back. He was better than this. It was not supposed to end this way.

An immortal stalked through the crumbling remains of the *Maxentius*. The gunship was now nothing more than a spider's web of crumbling steel and it fell apart as the immortal brushed

aside the wisps of its hull. The immortal levelled the twin barrels of its gauss cannon at Kodelos. Kodelos fired but the bolter shots pinged uselessly off the construct's armoured chestplate. The power coils of the gauss cannon glowed as it made ready to fire.

A volley of bolter shots ripped into the immortal from the side. Its head was blown half away and its leg was severed. It toppled to the side and the fat bolt of energy from its gauss cannon flew wide, dissolving a patch of the cavern wall behind Kodelos. Warrior-constructs turned to face the assault but more bolter fire hammered into them and they were swept away as if by a sudden hurricane wind, shredded and dashed against the ravine wall.

A squad of Astral Knights jumped down into view. Kodelos recognised the livery of the Third Company. Their sergeant's armour had the white flashes of a veteran, the first sergeant of his company.

Ridiculously, Kodelos found himself searching his memory for the man's name, as if that was important here.

'Sergeant Kypsalah,' said Kodelos stupidly.

'My prince lives!' exclaimed the sergeant. 'The peasants rejoice! We saw you come down here, we didn't think anyone could have survived.'

'My co-pilot fell,' said Kodelos, his thoughts still so muddled it felt like someone else was speaking with his voice.

'Then he will be mourned,' said Kypsalah. 'But not yet. We are making the final push. Khabyar's bringing most of us down the middle, we're moving around to flank. Will you join us, Prince Kodelos? The royal seal is just what this operation needs.'

Without waiting for an answer, one of First Sergeant Kypsalah's squad threw Kodelos a bolter – a customised model, with twin ammunition hoppers instead of a magazine slot and a scope with three cycling lenses.

'Look after her,' said the brother who had thrown it to him. He carried a meltagun as his main weapon, the perfect tool for cutting through warrior-construct bodies at close range.

Kypsalah led a strikeforce of several units from different companies, fast-moving tactical units not slowed down by heavy weapons. They followed the ravine towards the cathedral – more construct units were moving towards the crash site, only to walk into a wall of bolter fire the Astral Knights threw out without breaking stride. Kodelos stayed beside Kypsalah's squad and could already hear the sound of heavy bolters and missile launchers firing from the direction of the cathedral, and of gauss fire streaking out in response. He looked up to see one of the seven moons passing overhead, the electronic eye set into the sphere swivelling downwards to watch them.

Heqiroth knew they were coming. He had probably known as soon as he reached the Cathedral of the Seven Moons that the Astral Knights would have to face him there. It was the only way to finish the fight on Borsis and the overlord knew it.

Was this a better way to die, in the shadow of the cathedral facing thousands of warrior-constructs? Kodelos did not know. He could not fish out coherent thoughts from his mind. Everything had changed so suddenly in the last few minutes. He felt like Prince Kodelos was gone and a new man had appeared in his place, experiencing Borsis for the first time.

'Spread out!' ordered Kypsalah over the vox. 'Keep moving! Hit hard!'

Squad Kypsalah led the way around the ravine corner which still smouldered from the fiery descent of the *Maxentius*. The Cathedral of the Seven Moons loomed into sight.

From ground level, it was impossible to imagine such a place ever falling to an enemy force. The cathedral was like a confluence of everything that made Borsis the appalling, impossible place it was. The soaring pinnacles drew the eye upwards towards the zenith, where the topmost spires were lost among the clouds. The place seethed like a hive of insects, with warrior-constructs along the walls and millions of scarabs flowing from the archways. The upper levels were dominated by enormous hangar openings from which the fighter craft must have emerged. Every surface was carved and undulating as if turned on a lathe. The seven moons had turned their eyes downwards, seven huge telescope arrays peering down at Heqiroth's doorstep.

The main strikeforce had rolled right up towards the front door of the cathedral, a gatehouse with a set of double doors three storeys high. Khabyar had sent in the Devastator units of his Ninth Company, anchoring a firing line with tactical units on the flanks. Half a Chapter's worth of Space Marines formed an armoured wedge grinding forward under the Devastators' fire, so dense it looked like they were marching under a sky of las-blasts and missile contrails.

Opposing them was a phalanx of thousands of warrior-constructs, marching in perfect formation. They formed a rectangle fifty constructs deep, the front ranks firing a constant sizzling curtain of gauss fire. The constructs were being gunned down in their scores, the fire eating through the front ranks and deep into the centre of the formation, but the necrons did not care. There were more of them coming, and they had warriors to spare.

'Onward!' came Khabyar's voice over the vox. Kodelos spotted Khabyar leading the advance. The banner of the Ninth Company was unfurled now, riddled with smoking gauss blasts, carried over the foremost point of the advance. Khabyar was beneath it, already surrounded by a heap of shattered constructs.

From gateways opening up in the ground floor of the cathedral came more necrons, kept in reserve until the Astral Knights made their play. Massive three-legged war constructs – the walkers, as the slaves had called them – stepped over the rear ranks of warriors, spraying lashing whips of incandescent particles into the Astral Knights. Canoptek spyders floated behind the phalanx taking up fallen constructs and shredding them, regurgitating the reclaimed metal as swarms of voracious scarabs.

From another port emerged an anti-grav throne piloted by a pair of warrior-constructs plated in gold and purple lacquer. Carried on the throne was a necron noble, its headdress like a pair of gilded horns curving down over its shoulders, its decorated torso and shoulder guards inlaid with the colours of the Nephrekh dynasty. It pointed as vox-casters mounted on the throne blared orders in a grating machine-tongue. Ranks of immortals followed its throne, and its movements were shadowed by a close-knit formation of triarch praetorians and lychguard.

'There,' ordered Khabyar. 'Hit the noble.'

He barely needed to give the order at all. Khabyar's force, almost forty Astral Knights of veteran and assault units, scrambled to charge across the wreckage-littered ground. A wing of the phalanx turned to bring their gauss blasters to bear on the flanking force but the return fire ripped through them as the Astral Knights fired on the run. Kodelos let the bolter in his hands fight its own battle – it was well-balanced and the action was so smooth he barely felt the recoil.

Battle-brothers from one of the assault squads charged past Kodelos into the phalanx, chainblades spraying sparks as they carved into the bodies of the warrior-constructs. Kypsalah broke through the phalanx and the noble's anti-grav throne lay ahead, pivoting to bring its mounted gauss cannon to bear. A stalker walked into Kypsalah's path and his squad scattered, the particle whip lashing across the ground between them.

Kodelos fired up at the glinting red eyes mounted on the stalker's low-slung head. It turned and took a step towards him. Kodelos ran past its leg and rolled under it as the particle whip gouged a deep scar into the ground behind him.

Bolter fire hammered up into the stalker. A lascannon shot from across the battlefield bored through its hull and it slumped down onto one of its knees. The strikeforce kept moving and shooting even as the throne's gauss fire shot down one of Squad Kypsalah and sliced through the leg of one of the assault brethren.

Kodelos followed Kypsalah to the throne. Kypsalah grabbed a handhold and swung himself up. One of the construct pilots wrestled with him as Kodelos followed the sergeant up onto the throne. The borrowed bolter in his hands blew the second pilot-construct apart as the necron noble descended from its seat, the staff in its hands crackling with power. The mouth-slit of its face was a grille worked into a permanent snarl. It had one eye, a red orb set into the middle of its forehead.

Kodelos tried to blast at it from close range but the power staff batted his bolter aside. The necron grabbed Kodelos by the throat and he could feel the pincer grip of its steel hand buckling the armoured seal protecting his neck.

Kypsalah blasted the necron's other arm off at point-blank range. A chainsword lanced in from behind Kodelos and chewed through the ruin of its shoulder. The noble reared back and Kodelos forced himself out of its grip. He rattled bolter fire into it before two more Astral Knights fell on it and ripped it apart with chainblades.

The throne tilted and Kodelos slid back down to the ground. The orders blared from the throne's vox-casters had become a metallic scream.

'It fears us!' Captain Khabyar was yelling over the vox. Kodelos could just see the banner of the Ninth Company flying in tatters at the heart of the battle line. 'It sends everything it has, but it will not be enough! The Overlord of Borsis fears us! We have taught the machine to know dread!'

The inside of Kodelos's head was still a whirl. The constant din of gauss blasts and bolter fire hammered at him. To a Space Marine they should have been no more disruptive than a light breeze, but again it seemed Kodelos was inside someone else's body, hearing their thoughts from somewhere else.

Everything he knew had gone. He had not died a knight of the sky. He had not died a prince.

The air above the battlefield shimmered and tore, as if reality had been struck a blow and a purple-black bruise of abnormality was spreading. From the disruption emerged three huge blocky shapes, hanging impossibly in the air. Each was a roughly rectangular block several metres high, topped by a glowing green crystal with arcs of power playing off it. Each corner of the floating machines had a particle whip weapon that fired down at the advancing Astral Knights, but that was not the real threat.

The slaves called them monoliths, the sentinel-constructs of the necrons. Heqiroth had only a few to call on, and was loath to deploy them. They were deadly war machines, but they were far more valuable to him as conduits through the information architecture of Borsis.

In unison, one side of each monolith slid aside revealing a zone of rippling space, like a surface of water held vertically. It seemed to Kodelos that each such zone led to a half-glimpsed interior far more extensive than the monolith's size could allow for. From this indistinct space marched the distorted shapes of more warrior-constructs.

When the first constructs emerged from the monoliths, Kodelos saw they were much more ornate than the regular warrior-constructs, and walked upright instead of hunched. Their manner of decoration was different to the lychguard and praetorians. They did not wear the colours of any dynasty. Their bodies were plated with bronze. Each carried a halberd with a green crystal blade.

The new constructs dropped down into the middle of the battlefield and set about carving into Khabyar's advance. Bolter fire rattled off them and their blades cut through power armour, slicing heads from bodies. The monoliths did not stop disgorging their cargo – hundreds of the bronze necrons dropped down onto the battlefield. Thousands. The torrent seemed as if it would never end. A throne drifted from one monolith, then another, carrying nobles in the same bronze livery.

'The temple troops,' said Kypsalah in amazement.

Kodelos realised why the Astral Knights had made their assault on the Cathedral of the Seven Moons – their desperate, futile assault that could never possibly succeed. He knew why his Chapter Master had decided to give Heqiroth the pitched battle the overlord had been seeking ever since the Astral Knights had arrived on Borsis. It all made perfect, awful sense.

And his death meant something after all.

'I am Prince Kelvanah Kodelos Ban Rehannian!' yelled Kodelos. 'Who will follow me?'

The mission he had completed before joining Khabyar's assault made sense. The choice of the cathedral as the target made sense. It all did. Kodelos could not help but smile as he ran at the newly reinforced necron phalanx, bolter blazing. The Astral Knights nearby joined him, because for all they might claim to renounce their family obligations when they joined the Astral Knights they were still sons of Obsidia and he was still their prince.

Kodelos leapt into the fray. A bronze temple-construct turned to face him. Kodelos slammed into it with all his weight, wrenching its halberd around and blasting half its skull away with his

bolter.

There were still more reinforcements pouring from the monoliths. But it did not matter. His duty was clear at last. Fight here and die.

It was good to know his purpose again. It was good to be so certain. Doubt had no place in a Space Marine's mind and now it was gone.

Kodelos knew absolutely what would happen now. When his bolter shells ran out he would fight with his combat knife. When his combat knife shattered he would fight with his bare hands. And he would die atop a heap of the slain enemy, just like in every legend of the Space Marines.

Kodelos welcomed it as the necrons pressed closer, and every one promised him a prince's death.



Addendum Procedural

My duties had held me for longer than I had anticipated or hoped. The troops and crewmen of the Varv Deliverance Mission had suffered gravely from the aftermath of the Battle of Safehold. Such an event could hardly pass without complications, but the fragility of the human mind always proves itself more debilitating a condition than I anticipate. They are not all inquisitors, I remind myself.

Upon my return to the Madrigal 12 station I was struck by the laxity of quarantine procedures. I should have been greeted by a servitor crew, more than one of which was combat-capable. Instead I was not greeted at all. I ordered my attendants, among whom I count veterans of the Dzobelyn Massacre and shieldbearers trained by the Conclave of Tmessos, to secure the station. I myself had taken the precaution of donning my power armour, displacer field generator and chain gauntlets. An inquisitor, as my master told me, can be neither too well armed nor too intimidating.

After confirming life support and structural integrity were no threat my attendants moved through the station to secure command and control, then the various sub-structures and compartments. This station is old and as such, while well-made and sturdy, it has many odd corners where all manner of evils might be hiding. They were swept and confirmed clear, as was the mess hall in which I was aware Medicae Obscurum Kalliam Helvetar was set up for her autoseance procedures.

Medicae Obscurum Helvetar was unconscious in the autoseance apparatus. The servitors attending to her were on standby. I immediately summoned my medicae attendants, numbering two medicae extremis and a trauma-servitor, who reported Helvetar to be in a comatose state. They stabilised her and took her to the station's sick bay.

During Helvetar's convalescence, during which she was kept in a medical coma, I reviewed the reports of previous autoseance contacts, along with the raw psychogravings via pict screen. Her progress struck me as impressive, especially given the physical and mental strain the procedure had clearly caused her.

During this time my attendants continued to monitor the corpse of the autoseance subject, whose putrefaction had been halted, and established security protocols for the further use of the Madrigal 12 station.

I paid careful attention to the condition of Medicae Obscurum Kalliam Helvetar. Given that it would take an unacceptable length of time to summon another Inquisitorial agent with the capacity to perform the autoseance procedure, Medicae Helvetar's survival was crucial to the resolution of the Varv Deliverance Mission.

I ordered sufficient provisions be transported onto the station from the *Needlefang*. In anticipation of my work in the Varv system being almost completed, I gave orders for the fleet to make preparations for a warp jump.

– From the journal of Lord Inquisitor Quilven Rhaye

Addendum Personal

We are never taught by our masters that we must be ready to lose all those we care about, and to lose them because of decisions we have made, but we must learn to do so the moment we

join the Holy Ordos.

It is so much to ask for someone to go through what she does to herself. But she has never questioned it. I know she is afraid of the psychoconductive coil and the somatic stabilisers and I do not blame her. But she has never spoken of her fear, or asked that I give her respite from performing the procedure. What I have asked of her these last weeks has been enough to kill her, that is certain, but I cannot spare her.

We destroy our friends. It is the sacrifice an inquisitor makes. We all die in service, but the same can be said of the Imperial Guard and the crewmen of the Imperial Navy. They do not have to offer up the people they care about on the altar of the Emperor's will. They do not have to look those people in the eye, knowing they will one day send them to their deaths or see them broken by our enemies. That is why so few can serve as inquisitors. And it is why these thoughts cannot be broadcast to the Imperium at large. They cannot know what we do. They cannot know we are just men.

The orderlies tell me Kalliam's life signs are picking up. I wish she would stay comatose, and would slip away quietly.

The man wishes that, at least. The inquisitor wants her healthy so she can plug herself back into that Astral Knight's brain.



TWELVE

Chapter Master Amhrad

The Temple of Heretics was silent. The only sound was inside Amhrad's head, the din of battle crackling over the vox-net from halfway across the surface of Borsis. Amhrad tuned it out. He was ignorant of what was happening there, of how many of his battle-brothers were fighting and dying at the Cathedral of the Seven Moons, but it did not matter how that battle went. That it was taking place at all was all that mattered.

'It's clear,' voxed Scout-Sergeant Faraji from ahead. Amhrad could see Faraji and Librarian Valqash between the pillars of the temple, moving through the cavernous interior.

'It may be empty, Chapter Master,' said Chaplain Masayak beside Amhrad. 'But it will not be unguarded.'

'And we may be few,' replied Amhrad, 'but we are not unprepared.'

The legion of bronze necrons in the temple was gone. Where there had been hundreds of ranks of them, watched over by their enthroned nobles, now there was just a vast, empty space with a ceiling so high it was lost in the darkness. Faraji and Valqash looked tiny in the distance as Amhrad led the rest of the squad into the temple.

Brother Kodelos in the *Maxentius* had paused on his way to the cathedral long enough to drop off Amhrad and his chosen officers at the Temple of Heretics. Amhrad had brought Faraji with him, the Scout-sergeant who had recovered the intelligence on Borsis's destination from the necropolis. Hyalhi and Masayak were there as Amhrad's closest advisors. Codicier Valqash and Techmarine Sarakos were specialists whose expertise could be valuable in dealing with whatever lay inside the temple. They were not many in number, but they had to be a small force to avoid Hegiroth's notice, and Amhrad had chosen them carefully.

The temple delved deeper below the surface of Borsis. The sound of the quicksilver river outside died down until the only sound was the ringing of the Astral Knights footsteps on the steel floor. The legion chamber gave way to a vast nave flanked by rows of columns, fringed with side chapels. Each chapel was dedicated to a dynasty of Borsis's necron rulers. Carved friezes ran around the walls depicting Borsis's history, always the subjugation of alien races and the coronation of new overlords witnessed by ranks of necron aristocrats.

'It might not be why this place was built,' said Chaplain Masayak, 'but the xenos turned this place into a temple to themselves.'

'They killed their gods,' added Hyalhi, 'so naturally they appointed themselves to replace them.'

'No obvious ways out,' said Faraji, 'except the way we came.' Faraji had scouted out the nave and was standing by the altar, an enormous vertical slab of steel covered in hieroglyphics. Not for the first time, Amhrad wondered what secrets the Astral Knights might have found out about the necrons if they could only read their language.

'They were guarding more than just this,' said Valqash.

'Chapter Master,' said Faraji, 'just what were they guarding? We're all here now and I doubt we're going anywhere else. Sooner rather than later Hegiroth is going to realise why we sent the whole Chapter after him. We need to know.' Amhrad gave this some thought, realised the Scout-sergeant was correct, and told the assembled Astral Knights what they had come there to

find.

While they were absorbing this information Chief Librarian Hyalhi, who had known already and indeed had helped convince Amhrad of this course of action, knelt on the floor before the altar, head bowed. Amhrad recognised the Librarian turning his attention inwards, back through the architecture of his conscious mind and out into the psychic realm. Hyalhi had tried to describe to Amhrad what it was he could see with his inner eye, but Amhrad was a practical soul and he had not understood Hyalhi's talk of threads and futures. That was why he valued Hyalhi as an advisor – he understood things that Amhrad, a soldier first and everything else second, could not.

'Below us,' said Hyalhi. 'Something very old. Much older than the rest of Borsis. Mankind did not exist when it was buried.'

'Below us?' said Techmarine Sarakos. 'Where?'

Hyalhi waved a hand at the centre of the nave, indicating the space between the pews. Sarakos walked up to the space and cycled through the tools on his servo-harness's arm, settling on an industrial cutter. A blade of caged plasma leapt from the tip of the arm and Sarakos began carving down into the steel plating of the floor.

The rest of the Astral Knights formed up defensively, instinctively covering all the approaches to the nave, as if something could come leaping from the shadows at any second.

Perhaps it would. They were being watched, of course. There was no way a location like this would be a blank spot in the overlord's sight. What mattered was the time it took. If they could be quick, it might work. If they were held up here, if the necrons moved faster, they would all be dead before they had a chance to prove Hyalhi's advice right or wrong.

'Is it here, Hyalhi?' asked Amhrad as Sarakos continued to slice away at the floor.

'Perhaps,' said Hyalhi. 'Destiny is so thick here I cannot see for certain.'

'And do our threads end in this place?'

Hyalhi smiled, an odd sight that Amhrad was not very familiar with. 'Some do,' he said. 'Whether that is our lives or our duty, I cannot tell. I wish mine was an exact science, Chapter Master.'

'Assist me,' said Techmarine Sarakos. Masayak, Valqash and Faraji joined him at the four corners of a floor slab that had come loose. The four Astral Knights hauled the slab aside.

There was darkness below, scattered with thousands of tiny lights, shuddering with the deep thump of vast machinery.

Without anything being said, Scout-Sergeant Faraji was selected to be the first down. He dropped into the hole and the sound of him landing rang out a moment later.

'No contacts,' he voxed. 'Join me.'

Sarakos, Masayak and Hyalhi followed.

How much would it take to stop these few Astral Knights? Not many necrons, thought Amhrad, especially if Heqiroth could send some of the lychguard or praetorians, or even the original bronze temple guard, back to the temple. A pack of flayed ones. A couple of spyders. He did not know what to expect, only that it was coming.

It would come from the darkness, hidden from the Astral Knights until the last moment, because this was the enemy's ground. It would sound rather like that faint clink of metal on metal, almost lost in the echoes of the Astral Knights footsteps.

'Chapter Master?' Amhrad turned to see Codicier Valqash waiting by the hole. 'I trust you do not want to wait here alone.' Amhrad turned back to the centre of the room and joined the Codicier.

'We do not have this place to ourselves,' said Amhrad. 'Keep watch, Brother Codicier. Do not let them get behind us.'

'Of course, Chapter Master,' said Valqash. Though Amhrad knew all of the battle-brothers of the Astral Knights, he did not know all of them well. Valqash was one he had rarely spoken with. Amhrad knew from the Librarium's reports that Valqash had an aggressive streak that suited the nature of his psyker power, but was untested in command. Hyalhi had wanted him there. That was enough for Amhrad. He vaulted down into the hole, bracing his knees to land

heavily. The floor shook beneath him.

Below, stretching out further than even his augmented vision could see, was an array of generators and turbines whirring and thudding away into the darkness. The air was so thick with chemicals and dust that without the filters of their armour and enhanced lungs the Astral Knights would have been unable to breathe. The air was heavy with a haze that made everything look distant and half-formed.

‘Those are drawing a lot of power,’ voxed Techmarine Sarakos. ‘The structure requires a great deal of it to function.’

In the centre of the complex, ringed by the web of walkways the Astral Knights were standing on, was the heart of the Temple of Heretics, the ultimate blasphemy for which it had been built. It took the form of a scale map of the galaxy, rendered in innumerable winking lights hanging in the air, describing the grand sweep of the spiral’s arms. It resembled the galaxy that Amhrad knew from the star maps of the Imperium, but not perfectly.

‘There is no Eye of Terror,’ said Scout-Sergeant Faraji. He was correct. The awful distortion that mutilated one whole spiral arm, the greatest and most terrible warp storm in the galaxy, was absent.

‘No Maelstrom, either,’ said Hyalhi. ‘Then this map is older than the Imperium. Older than the Dark Age of Strife. Older than the Fall of the Eldar, if the histories of that lying race are to be believed.’ Amhrad walked into the clouds of stars. They parted around him, like water around the bow of a ship. In the galactic core a mass of shimmering light, a crystalline shape with thousands of facets, shone like a caged sun.

Inside, Amhrad could make out a squirming darkness, almost blocked out by the light surrounding it – but not quite. He had an impression of eyes and mouths, of insistent, agonised movement.

‘This is it,’ he voxed. ‘Sarakos?’

‘Without the generators, the containment will fail,’ said the Techmarine.

‘Then distribute the melta-bombs,’ said Amhrad. ‘Valqash, stay on guard. The rest, be fast setting the charges.’

Techmarine Sarakos had brought along a clutch of melta-bombs for the occasion, fist-sized metal spheres divided into two halves. When an explosive charge forced the halves together, the core would melt down at a tremendous temperature, liquefying anything it touched and melting through multiple layers of metal – the hull of a spaceship, the engine of a tank, the housing of a generator.

Sarakos clambered off the walkway and dropped onto one of the generators. They were enormous vertical pillars, the gaps in the housing showing their blades spinning round rapidly. Perhaps they used geothermal energy from Borsis’s core, assuming the artificial world produced any. Perhaps they drew on some alien power source of which the Imperium was ignorant. It didn’t matter, as long as they could break.

Sarakos, Masayak and Faraji began setting the charges, looping bundles of melta-bombs around the generators. Hyalhi dropped down after them, moving across the precarious generator housings. The drops between them stretched down into blackness – there was no telling how far the fall was. Hyalhi moved with such assurance Amhrad knew he was using a fraction of his psychic power, reading the threads of fate immediately around him to minimise the risk. Amhrad had seen Hyalhi do it dozens of times in battle and still, it never seemed normal.

‘Can you taste it, Chief Librarian?’ voxed Codicier Valqash.

Hyalhi paused from wiring the melta-bombs. ‘I can,’ he said.

‘Metal,’ said Valqash. ‘In the air.’

Upon his ascension to the rank of Chapter Master, Amhrad had been granted access to Obsidia’s Forbidden Armoury. There were stored the relics of the Chapter’s heroes, one of which the Chapter Master was required by tradition to carry into battle. It was the first time Amhrad had seen with his own eyes relics ranging from the Breacher of Trepanation to the power blade Daemoncarver. He had held the Helm of Contempt in his hands, and felt the

coolness of its obsidian surface. But he had known none of them were for him. In the furthest corner of the Forbidden Armoury had been mounted the twin axes known as the Wolves of Keyherdos – named after the predators hunted down by Prince Elnah Vohari Ban Koss, the same predators from whose thigh bones the axes' hafts were made. Amhrad had fought with a sabre and swordbreaker in the duelling festivals of Port Exalt and he was most at home with a weapon in each hand.

Amhrad drew the Wolves of Keyherdos now. The stars projected around him swam as if suddenly agitated. Surrounded by light, he was blinded to anything that might come at him from the shadows above or below. He ran out of the galaxy projection, aware of the many eyes of the creature in the crystal prison following him.

He saw a silvery blur streak down from above, like a shooting star through a night sky. Valqash reacted fast, throwing out both hands and focusing a shining beam of crimson power through his palms. The beam scored deep across the building, slicing up through the floor of the temple above.

But the Codicier had not been fast enough. A necron construct, too quick to focus on properly, landed on the walkway beside Valqash. It was surrounded by the swirl of a silver cloak, and Amhrad had the impression of twin blades moving in a black blur.

Valqash's bolter was in his hand. Bolter shells sprayed wide. The construct darted around him and suddenly Valqash's breastplate was laid open from neck to abdomen.

The Wolves of Keyherdos swung as Amhrad ran, feet pounding on the walkway. The construct paused long enough to turn to see Amhrad approaching. Amhrad had never seen this construct before, but he recognised it. The slaves had spoken of it.

Judicator Metzoi, master of the triarch praetorians. Heqiroth's executioner.

Metzoi looked back at Amhrad. One of the necron's eyes was gone, patched over with a triangle of polished bronze. The rest of his face was a smooth oval with a two vertical slits for a nose and one horizontal slit for a mouth, like the crudest drawing of a human skull. His armour was bronze and white, cracked and dented by warfare. The edges of his obsidian blades were so sharp they glowed a translucent blue.

Metzoi's blades lanced out and sliced through Valqash's neck. The Codicier's head tumbled free of his body and fell down past the walkway, lost in the darkness between the generators. Amhrad still felt a chill whenever a battle-brother died under his command. He had long learned to set it aside and ignore it until the battle was done, but it was still there, shining icily in his gut.

He was running at Metzoi. The Judicator turned to face him. Gunfire stuttered up from below and Amhrad was aware of the ceiling of the generator hall rippling like black liquid, and more ornate warrior-constructs dropping down. Triarch praetorians, the custodians of Borsis and Heqiroth's most feared elites. Amhrad and Metzoi clashed above the generator floor. Metzoi was fast but Amhrad could read every slash and arc as if it had been drawn out for him beforehand. They both fought with a similar style, with twin blades weighted to be used as a pair. Metzoi's obsidian blades were so sharp that after the first few flurries, the Wolves' edges were notched with the contact. The Wolves' power fields burst and sparked to force Metzoi back a half-step each time he was about to lunge in for a killing blow.

One Wolf, Jhozaan, named after the beast that had prowled the Syclade Forest on Obsidia, rang off Metzoi's shoulder. When Amhrad drew it back a chunk of Metzoi's pauldron rattled off a floor still slick with Valqash's blood. The other wolf, named after Gestolo the scourge of the Port Exalt coast, parried one of Metzoi's obsidian swords and turned the momentum into a swing that sent shards of broken carapace raining down from the Judicator's chestplate.

'You fight like one who has never faced his equal,' said Amhrad as the two backed away from each other, their blades hovering waiting for an opening. 'But I have fought a thousand as good as me and better, and none of them has ever laid me low. You know how to fight, alien. But I know how to win.'

'Your kind has come far,' said Metzoi. 'I glimpsed you when you slept in caves and fought with clubs. You have risen to our notice in no more than a heartbeat. We will spare you slavery, human. You will be made extinct before you can become a threat.'

They were words without meaning, no more than camouflage to mask the thoughts going on behind them. Each combatant was weighing up every potential thrust and counter-move, each possible chain of attack, parry and kill-stroke that would lead to victory or defeat. Metzoi was calculating them, a cogitator crunching through probabilities and measurements. Amhrad had nearly a century of experience on the battlefield, and the instincts of a man born to the duel.

It was Metzoi who struck first. Amhrad was almost caught by surprise. He parried the obsidian blade hacking up at his waist and spun out of the arc of the follow-up blow slicing down towards his skull. He drew back his arm for a thrust into the necron's midriff but Metzoi dropped to one knee and hooked an arm under Amhrad's leg. Amhrad was suddenly tipped back and over the walkway railing. He caught the railing with his elbow before he fell but his legs were hanging out over nothing.

Gauss fire and bolter shots echoed around the chamber. The other Astral Knights were fighting back against Metzoi's praetorians. Amhrad had his own survival to worry about before he could help the battle-brothers he was supposed to lead.

Metzoi drew his blade back. The thrust would take Amhrad in the throat. Even his armour, forged on the artificers' anvils on Obsidia, would not hold against the supernatural sharpness of the obsidian. Amhrad threw out Jhozaan to knock the blow aside. To do so he had to let go of the railing. He let himself fall, and for a split second the profane certainty bloomed in his mind that he would fall between the generators and plummet right down to whatever lay at Borsis's core.

He slammed into the top of one of the generator stacks. His head rang against the steel and for a moment there was only blackness in front of his eyes. Amhrad had expected to die many times. Sometimes the odds had simply favoured defeat, as when a vastly larger enemy army attacked in full force or he found himself face to face with some alien monstrosity far stronger and tougher than himself. There had been times where his survival was a matter of chance with nothing to do with his skill, training or wargear – the crash of the *Tempestus*, for instance, could have claimed him as easily as it had any of the battle-brothers who died in the impact.

Those were times he had accepted the likelihood of death. But Amhrad had only been certain he would die on two occasions. The latest was now, facing Judicator Metzoi, knowing he would never leave the Temple of Heretics alive. The first was Varvenkast.

Those moments had been at the forefront of Amhrad's memory ever since the formation of the Varv Deliverance Mission, when Amhrad had heard the name of that hive world spoken aloud for the first time in decades. The memories were of finery and beauty, for he had expected to die surrounded by the opulence of the Governor's Residence in the spire of Hive Tertius.



THIRTEEN

Captain Amhrad

Governor Rheydolmar was required by his status to love art. Though he had no understanding of it, and by all accounts did not enjoy it, it was expected of an aristocrat of Varvenkast to maintain a collection of the sector's finest art. So his palace was full of it – enormous paintings of elaborately costumed women, suits of archaic armour and busts of Imperial heroes filled every wall and niche. There were landscapes of an ancient pollution-free Varvenkast, hung as if in deliberate reminder of how beautiful this world had been before the needs of the hive cities had bleached it of all its colour. Priceless manuscripts of literary works and books of prayer were preserved behind glass. The ceilings were covered in multi-coloured frescoes of angel-filled skies, as if the building was embarrassed about Varvenkast's own red-brown heavens.

It was in this place, in the Petitioner's Wing of the Governor's Residence, that Amhrad had finally caught up with Chapter Master Derelhaan.

Derelhaan's bolter was still smoking in his hands. A few minutes before he had executed Governor Rheydolmar for his failure to comply with Imperial law in controlling the mutants of Hive Tertius.

'Captain Amhrad, your post is in the manufactorum slums,' said Derelhaan. 'Why have you left it?'

'Because I am not the only one to derelict his duty this day,' replied Amhrad.

Derelhaan's expression did not change. He looked from Amhrad to Chaplain Masayak, who had accompanied Amhrad to the hive spire – indeed, it had been Masayak's misgivings that had brought Amhrad here in the first place. Even Space Marines might wither under Derelhaan's gaze, for he was as stern and hard-edged a man as had ever been born into the great houses of Obsidia. Even before he had become a Space Marine, people had been instinctively afraid of him. Now he wore the brilliant white armour of a Chapter Master, with the silver-scaled Mantle of Augustar over his shoulder guards and a host of honour studs in the skin of his forehead. Rheydolmar must have thought Death itself had visited him at his residence.

'Explain yourself!' barked Derelhaan. The sound of his raised voice brought the Astral Knights who had accompanied him to the residence. Amhrad recognised Librarian Hyalhi, an Astral Knight who had risen through the ranks alongside Amhrad and whom Amhrad considered a friend. The awful possibility of one set of battle-brothers turning their guns on another was a sickness in the back of his mind.

'First, explain this,' said Amhrad. He threw a small metal item onto the floor, one given to him by Chaplain Masayak as the blood was still drying from the massacre in the manufactorum district.

It was the symbol of House Janiak. Every son of Obsidia knew it. Janiak the pariahs. The traitors. The banished.

'I found it on a corpse in the manufactorum,' said Chaplain Masayak. 'It is not the only one.'

Derelhaan looked down at the symbol. He picked it up off the floor, spat on it, and threw it into a corner of the room. 'And for this you demand account from me?' he said. 'I restored the stained honour of all of Obsidia. You should raise me on your shoulders and give me thanks! The Janiak vermin are dead!'

‘Then why did you lie to us to bring us here?’ retorted Amhrad. He took a step forwards, dangerously close to Derelhaan. If this turned to violence, he had to keep it between him and the Chapter Master. No one else needed to die in Hive Tertius tonight. ‘You invented this tale of hidden mutants and the Inquisition’s orders. That is not the act of one who knows his battle-brothers will agree.’

‘You dare?’ Derelhaan was snarling at Amhrad, and spittle caught on his lips. ‘The filth of House Janiak murdered the patriarch of my people. They fled banishment to the equatorial jungles like whipped dogs. They fled here to this hive and lived like honest citizens of the Imperium, as if they were free of any crime! What is duty, if it is not to hunt them down and execute them?’

‘And how many innocents did we take with them?’ shouted Amhrad. He fought to keep his anger down but it rose up in spite. He could barely see Derelhaan through the faces of the men and women who had died in Hive Tertius that day, culled like animals, not a few of them to his own blade and bolter. ‘Thousands, Derelhaan! Tens of thousands!’

‘They came here to hide among the populace,’ said Derelhaan. ‘How else was I to ensure every Janiak was dead? We had to kill them all.’

‘And for what?’ said Amhrad.

‘To do my duty by my forefathers,’ said Derelhaan. There was complete conviction in his face and voice. ‘I am Suulkeyar Derelhaan Ban Ven Targeris. I am the avenger of my murdered kin.’

‘We each leave our bloodlines behind when we become an Astral Knight,’ said Amhrad.

‘You believe that?’ said Derelhaan with a bitter laugh. ‘There is not one Astral Knight who ever abandoned loyalty to his family! Do not tell me you have, son of Rahizar. Do not insult me with that.’

‘I am not Firajar Amhrad Ban Rahizar,’ said Amhrad. It was an effort to keep his voice level. ‘I am Captain Amhrad of the Astral Knights. In the sight of my Emperor, I have never been anything else. And because you do not have the strength to say the same, you have compelled us to murder thousands of innocents. You are not fit to wear the colours of the Astral Knights, let alone the rank of our Chapter Master.’

‘And will you kill me, son of Rahizar?’ Derelhaan was feigning disbelief that Amhrad would dare try any such thing, and he feigned it well, but his hand hovered a little too close to the hilt of his power sword.

‘You have betrayed us all,’ said Amhrad. He, too, was keeping his voice calm and level – but his muscles, too, were tensed ready to fight. ‘There is no other punishment. So the Codex demands.’

‘And the honour of my fathers demands,’ replied Derelhaan, ‘that if you want my head, you will have to work for it.’

Of course, Derelhaan was faster. He had decades more experience than his accuser. He had fought stronger and more skilled enemies than Amhrad. It was all Amhrad could do to bring his bolter around instinctively into the path of the power sword that Derelhaan drew, sliding it from its scabbard and aiming a slash at Amhrad’s throat with a single move as quick as thought. Amhrad’s bolter was sheared in two by the power blade. It was only a matter of a couple of centimetres that the same did not happen to his neck. Amhrad stumbled back against a massive hardwood dresser that must have cost more than a lifetime’s labour for one of Varvenkast’s hivers. The wood splintered under his weight and he blundered into the wall, almost falling to one knee.

He expected his vision to be full of Derelhaan, attacking in a silver swirl to finish him off. But instead, it was Librarian Hyalhi who stood in front of him, between Amhrad and the Chapter Master.

Hyalhi did not move any faster than Derelhaan, but with such economy and precision it seemed he had every spin and parry planned out in advance. Amhrad knew of Hyalhi’s skills but he had never seen them up close like this before, and they were mesmerising. Hyalhi ducked the thrust of Derelhaan’s power sword and drove an elbow into the Chapter Master’s face. Bone broke and skin tore. One of Derelhaan’s eye sockets was half-collapsed.

Hyalhi knocked the power sword aside again with his force staff. A mundane weapon would have been shattered by the power field but the force staff held and Derelhaan was forced back a step.

'I am surrounded by traitors!' snarled the Chapter Master. 'There will be a purge of the weak! There will—'

The final words were cut off in a flash of purple-black energy. The spots died down from before Amhrad's eyes and he saw Chaplain Masayak standing behind Derelhaan.

The power sword fell from Derelhaan's fingers. The field smoked and sputtered against the carpet.

Masayak's crozius arcanum was buried in the back of Chapter Master Derelhaan's skull. The mace-like weapon's head was in the shape of an eagle and its wings formed the cutting edges. One wing had disappeared into Derelhaan's head, slicing deep into his brain. Derelhaan's remaining good eye was rolled back and a droplet of blood ran from his nose.

Masayak planted his foot in the small of Derelhaan's back and used the leverage to pull the crozius back out. Derelhaan fell face-first onto the floor, his weight as dead and heavy as a felled tree. Amhrad got to his feet. Apart from Masayak, Hyalhi and himself, only a handful of Derelhaan's squad had witnessed the accusation and the killing.

'I am glad it was you,' said Amhrad. 'It was a Chaplain's duty.'

'One we are loath to shoulder,' said Masayak. 'But sometimes, it must be done.'

'If word reaches the houses of Obsidia,' said Hyalhi, 'it will tear our world apart. Some would turn on us, some would support us. There would be war. Only we who saw it with our own eyes can know. We must be silent, brothers.'

'It was Rheydolmar,' said Masayak. 'He knew we were coming and set traps in his residence. Derelhaan was killed by one in the act of executing the governor. We will bear our fallen brother with all honours to the fortress-monastery, as one who died in battle with his duty fulfilled. If any do not agree, now is the time to speak up.'

No one did. There were fewer than ten Astral Knights in the Governor's Residence. If they could keep silent, if they saw Derelhaan's betrayal of their Chapter for what it was, then perhaps Obsidia and the Astral Knights might survive this.

'We have to make it right,' said Amhrad. 'I killed many people today who should not have died. The wound we have dealt to this world will never heal. Derelhaan told the lie but we pulled the trigger. We have to make it right.'

'We will,' said Masayak. 'But not now. We will find a way, brother-captain, but for now we must leave this world. A new Chapter Master must be appointed. The Astral Knights must fight on.'

'It should be one of us,' said Hyalhi. 'We can head off any consequences much more readily from the Chapter Master's throne.'

'The Reclusiam can ensure that happens,' replied Masayak. 'It cannot be a Chaplain, and while a Librarian Chapter Master is not unheard of it runs contrary to the Codex. Captain Amhrad?'

For a moment Amhrad was not certain what Masayak was asking. When it hit him, he fought the urge to point a finger at his chest and say, 'Me?' Amhrad stared down at Derelhaan's corpse. The back of his skull was a caved-in ruin and a clotted mass of blood surrounded his head. There was blood and brain matter spattered down the back of the Mantle of Augustar.

'I am not ready,' said Amhrad. 'I do not think I will ever be.'

'And yet it must be you,' said Chaplain Masayak.

'Then I will bear this weight,' said Amhrad, and even as he said the word it felt like a literal weight were crushing him down. Every battle-brother lost would be his responsibility – not just in his own company, which was a grave enough burden, but through the whole Chapter. Every defeat would be his alone.

'Derelhaan wanted to be Chapter Master,' said Hyalhi. 'He fought for it. He made it his life's work. Perhaps it is time the Astral Knights gave such power to one who does not seek it.'

Amhrad looked away from Derelhaan's corpse and switched to the command vox-channel.

'All squads,' he voxed, his words transmitted to every Astral Knight on Varvenkast. 'This is

Captain Amhrad. Chapter Master Derelhaan has fallen. Our mission is complete and further losses are unacceptable. All squads, move to extraction points and make ready for pickup. We will mourn our lord upon our return. For now, move out immediately.'

'Pick him up,' said Chaplain Masayak. 'Bear him like a hero.'

The Astral Knights picked up Derelhaan's body between them. Amhrad took the lead. They carried him through the grotesque opulence of the Governor's Residence out into the hive spire, where the polluted wind of Varvenkast whipped around the towers that overlooked the seemingly infinite hive sprawl. Already gunships and armoured shuttles were descending through the hive's uppermost reaches to pick up the Astral Knights and take them back to their transports waiting in orbit.

'I will be glad to leave this world,' said Hyalhi as the Astral Knights carried Derelhaan's body towards a landing pad adjoining the residence, where a gunship would shortly land to pick them up.

'Do not take too much comfort in leaving,' said Amhrad. 'One day, we will return.'



FOURTEEN

Chapter Master Amhrad

Amhrad dragged himself on his stomach across the gap to the next generator. Through the gaps in the housing the blades of the turbine roared past, fast enough to shred ceramite and bone.

Across the chamber, the praetorians were dropping from the distortion overhead. Some fell into the gaps between the generators, others were chewed up by the spinning blades. But most were surviving to engage the Astral Knights, and the Astral Knights were losing. Amhrad clambered to his feet, his head swimming from the impact. He saw Scout-Sergeant Faraji, hopelessly outclassed by the trio of necrons surrounding him. Faraji fired bursts from his bolter into the approaching necrons but the fire drew little more than sparks from their armoured torsos. Faraji switched to his combat knife and went for the eyepieces of the nearest construct, trying to blind it before it could gut him with its blade. The sword was surrounded by a halo of black energy, and the other two praetorians wielded tall staffs topped with axe-like blades. Faraji grabbed the back of the sword-wielding construct's skull and tried to drive his knife home, but the praetorian threw him to the floor and rammed its weapon down towards him.

The blade cut down through Faraji's leg at mid-thigh. Amhrad could hear Faraji cry out. The other two constructs aimed their staffs down at Faraji and fired point-blank blasts of particle fire into his face and chest. Much of the upper half of Faraji's body was obliterated.

Metzoi followed Amhrad down from the walkway, landing with rather more grace than Amhrad had. Amhrad was aware he might have blacked out for a moment with the impact, and his mind's eye was full of the memory of Chapter Master Derelhaan with his head split open by Masayak's crozius.

Metzoi darted towards Amhrad. Amhrad had kept hold of both the Wolves of Keyherdos and brought them up into a crossed guard, trapping the blade that arced down at him and pivoting on his back foot far enough to avoid the second blade slicing up at his groin. Metzoi caught Amhrad with a backhand against the side of the head and Amhrad fell back, jumping the gap behind him to reach the next generator. He hit the edge of the generator chest-first and found a handhold only at the expense of letting go of Gestolo. The axe clattered into the opening and vanished among the turbine blades. Amhrad pulled himself up and rolled onto the generator's surface.

The praetorians were battling the Astral Knights only one generator over. He saw Techmarine Sarakos using his servo-arm to hold one praetorian in a headlock as he blasted with his plasma pistol at another. The praetorians surrounded him like hunters holding a wounded quarry at bay. Amhrad did not doubt Sarakos would express nothing but concentration as the praetorians closed in. In the moments it took his pistol's power core to recharge the necrons came within striking distance. One thrust at him with its staff and Sarakos turned the necron he was holding into its path – the bladed end speared right through the necron's chest and the particle field shattered its chest, spilling smouldering components over the generator housing.

The second thrust hit home. One of the other praetorians had got around behind the Techmarine and impaled him through the back. The tip of the staff ripped out through the side of Sarakos's chest. The necron twisted the staff and tore Sarakos's body open, and for a moment the pulsing mass of lungs was revealed before blood welled up and cascaded from his chest.

The rest of the praetorians closed in until Sarakos was hidden by their armour-plated bodies, their swords and staffs rising and falling as they completed the kill.

Metzoi was suddenly upon Amhrad, bringing both blades to slice through his neck. Amhrad brought up Jhozaan in a desperate block and the ancient axe's haft was shattered, shards of it flying from his grip. The head of the axe clattered down over the edge of the generator, vanishing into the darkness.

A follow-up strike cut into the side of Amhrad's chest. Another bit deep into his upper left arm. Amhrad dropped a shoulder and charged into Metzoi, trusting in the armoured weight of a Space Marine to drive back the Judicator.

Metzoi took two steps back and dropped into a guard, both blades hovering. Amhrad was unarmed now and the Judicator took his time weighing up his prey, determined the next blow would be the last.

'When the necrons slumbered,' said Metzoi in his clipped, too-perfect Low Gothic, 'the praetorians watched. We saw mankind rise and fall. We saw it stagnate and rot. We have witnessed your past and mapped out your future. Borsis reaching its destination will be the start and after that it will not take long. Your death is among the first, and they will not end until all has been freed from the imperfection of humanity.'

More camouflage. Metzoi was waiting for the chance to execute a killing slash or thrust. Amhrad gave him that chance. He took a half-step back, like a nervous duellist shifting his weight for its own sake.

Metzoi lunged. Amhrad brought up his left arm and the obsidian blade cut right through it. Amhrad's hand and half his forearm fell away, cleanly severed, but the blade was turned aside from his throat. The other blade swung down at him but Amhrad put his shoulder guard in the way and though the blade bit down deep into the bone, it did not have the weight behind it to shear all the way through the dense ceramite into Amhrad's ribcage. Amhrad reached for Metzoi's face with his remaining hand. He found a grip there, with one finger in the construct's remaining eye and the thumb hooking into his mouth-slit. He hauled Metzoi off the floor – the construct was heavy, but not too heavy for a Space Marine. Amhrad grunted as he pitched Metzoi off the edge of the generator.

Metzoi hit the side of the generator hard, but jabbed out a blade that speared through the metal and arrested his fall. Of course it would take more than that to destroy the Judicator, but Amhrad didn't have to kill him.

In every fight, whether it was a formal duel or an all-out war, each side had an advantage and disadvantage. It might be numbers, training or willpower, but every combatant had one edge on the others. The key to victory was discovering what that edge was and exploiting it. The Codex Astartes had enshrined that principle almost ten thousand years before, as the Primarch Guilliman created his great work on the Space Marine way of war. And just as Amhrad believed in the pursuit of duty above all things, in the human right to exist in this galaxy and in the honour of his Chapter, he believed in the Codex Astartes. Amhrad had few advantages in this fight, but there was one he had for certain. It was not an easy one to recognise, because it was not strength of arms or numerical superiority, or any of the other factors a mundane commander would rely on.

The advantage was that for Judicator Metzoi to win, he had to survive. The same was not true of Chapter Master Amhrad. Amhrad was weakening rapidly. His body had staved off the shock of the loss of his arm, but it was catching up with him. His hearts were hammering to keep him going and the corresponding blood loss was already severe. The blood coagulating around the stump of his arm would stem it, but not before a good deal of it had spattered out onto the generator housings. Amhrad leapt to the next generator, almost falling. He dragged himself with his remaining hand onto the housing.

Faraji had died before he had finished setting the melta-bombs. Three were clustered there, not yet wired together. Amhrad finished wiring two of them to detonate, twisting the handles to remove the safeties. When disturbed, they would detonate. The third bomb he carried with him as he stumbled to the edge of the generator and jumped across to the next.

Above him the projected galaxy swirled, as if demonstrating the paths of its stars in fast forward. Millions of years raced past as the spiral arms slid through space. The crystalline shape at its centre was darker now, a purple-black stain spreading through it.

Masayak was still up and fighting. Hyalhi was beside him. Masayak had claimed half a dozen praetorians, their skulls shattered from blows of his crozius. The weapon was a great equaliser against a skilled opponent, smashing through guards and parries. Hyalhi fought with his force staff as always, wielding it like a partner in a dance, moving with the grace and perfection that no mundane fighter could match. The praetorians backed off for a second, waiting for the opportunity to close again.

‘Hyalhi!’ voxed Amhrad. ‘It is time. Go.’

Hyalhi looked around to see Amhrad. The sight must have been dismaying – his Chapter Master disarmed both of his weapons and literally. ‘Go,’ repeated Amhrad. ‘You must remember.’

Masayak glanced around at the Chief Librarian and gave him a brisk nod. Hyalhi broke off from the combat and grabbed one of the pillars holding the walkway above the generators. He clambered hand over hand and reached the guardrail to pull himself up onto the walkway.

The praetorians closed on Masayak. The Chaplain shattered the leg of one with a blow that came under its guard, an unexpected direction, and the construct toppled backwards into the darkness. Amhrad removed the safeties of the three melta-bombs Techmarine Sarakos had set. Greyness flickered at the edge of his vision as he made it to the next generator and did the same to those Hyalhi had set.

Masayak was heading in Amhrad’s direction. Amhrad saw the Chaplain’s armour was scored and dented all over. The crozius was blackened with scorch marks from the discharging power field. Masayak lept over to Amhrad’s position.

‘My charges are ready,’ said Masayak.

‘Hyalhi, are you clear?’ voxed Amhrad.

Before he could get a reply, Judicator Metzoi was on them. He loomed up behind Chaplain Masayak with his swords crossed like the blades of a pair of scissors. The construct swept them apart and sliced Masayak’s head off. The skull helm bounced against the housing and rolled over the edge of the generator. Masayak toppled to one side. Amhrad took a moment, no more than a fragment of thought, to honour Masayak’s memory. Without the Chaplain, the Astral Knights would never have survived Varvenkast. They would have fallen apart and been disbanded in dishonour. Masayak had prevented that, because he truly epitomised what the Astral Knights were.

We are the hand of tyranny. We are oppressors and destroyers. We are instruments of suffering we can never fully understand. But for all that we are, we honour our promises and we keep our word.

Judicator Metzoi stabbed Amhrad through the chest. The blade sliced through Amhrad’s secondary heart and out through his back. The second thrust to the chest destroyed Amhrad’s primary heart.

The necron had studied its enemy. It knew of a Space Marine’s physiology, and as a true executioner, it always made certain of its kill.

The melta-bomb was held in the crook of Amhrad’s elbow, his remaining hand on the handle. He twisted it as he felt his hearts stop beating.

Darkness fell over him, and he thought this must be death. Then, his world exploded into a billion shards of burning light.



*Orbital Supply Station Madrigal 12
High Polar Orbit, Safehold
Varv System*

**Encryption Code Hemlock
Inquisitorial Eyes Only. Ref. Lord Inquisitor Quilven Rhaye
Scrivened: Medicae Obscurum Kalliam Helvetar**

Following the successful recuperation from a comatose state, this functionary undertook a series of physical tests to assess the suitability for further contact. This functionary failed seven out of eleven of these tests. Lord Rhaye, who had arrived at Madrigal 12 during the period this functionary was comatose, ruled that given the importance of completing the autoseance process these failures were to be considered within acceptable tolerances. Prayer-cleansing rituals were performed while the servitors prepared the autoseance chamber and equipment.

During the comatose period this functionary experienced memory fragments, perhaps sensory echoes received during previous autoseance contacts but not consciously perceived at the time.

I look down at the stump of my severed arm. My Wolves are gone and so is my hand. And yet I cannot lose this fight, because my enemy has granted me a huge advantage of which he is not aware. In such a circumstance, the Codex dictates, victory requires no more than willpower and time. I feel victory rising within me, even as my blood pumps out onto the generator housing.

I watch the planets orbit with such grace I almost weep to see it. Mars is a rust-red orb, unstained by the spidery grip of its orbital dockyards. The moons of Saturn, tiny specks of illuminated stone, have yet to know the step of human feet. The majesty of the gas giants almost mesmerises me with their swirls of ever-churning colour. But it is Terra that truly arrests my eye. It is blue, with continents of green, streaked with high white clouds. The poles are capped with pure white. It is the cradle of my species, yet I have never seen a planet look so alien.

Blood and steel rains in the darkness. I have heard snatches of the call to arms, but the Astral Knights are fighting their battle above. I am cut off in this city of the dead and my battle is here. The flayed ones and wraiths are all around me, in the pitch dark. I can hear them approach. I have half a clip of bolter ammunition and my fallen sergeant's chainsword. It is all I need to die a Space Marine's death.

The doorway of the Cathedral of the Seven Moons yawns open and a phalanx of war machines strides out. Each walker fires its particle casters into the ranks of my battle-brothers. Beyond them I can see the interior of the cathedral, a vast monument to the arrogance of these aliens, a place of black crystal statues and the gigantic steel faces of long-dead necrontyr. It gives me such joy to know they will fall that I am not angered by the particle lash that slices deep into me. I feel no pain. I see only victory. I will die, but I have faith in my Chapter Master. My death is a cog in the machine of victory. I think on this as I fall.

The nature of these visions caused psychological distress and elevated cardiac and respiratory rates upon recollection. They were scrivened and added to the report of such visions for presentation to Lord Rhaye.

With the autoseance suite prepared this functionary made ready for further contact. Lord Inquisitor Rhaye was in attendance to observe the process, along with medicae from his personal retinue to assist with somatic stabilisation. Preparations for contiguous sensory relay were thereby completed.



Addendum Personal

I am glad that Lord Rhaye could be here. The subject is almost mined out. What remains is buried deep and I do not believe I can reach it without subjecting myself to the kind of stresses that left me comatose.

I think of my childhood and my family. Sometimes those thoughts come unbidden to me, even though I have left them all so far behind. All the time in between vanishes, all the strange and awful things I have seen and been a part of. In those times I am a child again. Amhrad's death hit me hard. It was a good death, but a Space Marine can take appalling levels of pain and I cannot. I feel every moment of it. Even though I have been inside his mind, I still cannot fathom what it must be like to live as one of them. He can set aside fear and cage it inside his mind, while I am filled with it. He can take the loss of a limb as another reality of duty, when I am paralysed by the horror of it. And he welcomed his death, knowing his duty was done.

I wish I could look on death as he did. I wish it more than anything. But I cannot. I do not want to die.



FIFTEEN

Chief Librarian Hyalhi

The transit system still functioned. That was something of a surprise since the Astral Knights had used it to congregate at the Cathedral of the Seven Moons, but then perhaps Hegiroth had little reason to shut it down when he had the entire – or nearly the entire – Astral Knights Chapter brought to battle at last.

Hyalhi leaned against the side of the cavernous lightning rail carriage. The walls and ceiling were covered with racks where necron warrior-constructs could be carried for transit, hanging in their hundreds. Now it was empty. Perhaps they were all fighting at the cathedral.

The carriage rumbled along the lightning rail, Borsis's hateful metal cityscape streaking by. For the first time since he had made it out of the Temple of Heretics, Hyalhi let himself feel the pain of the wound he had been dealt by the praetorians' gauss fire. A deep burn had ripped out a good chunk of his neck and right shoulder, and though the coagulants produced by his additional organs had sealed the wound quickly he could barely turn his head.

Hyalhi focused inwardly, letting the physical pain drop away. Chapter Master Amhrad's memories were almost bedded down in his subconscious, locked away in a mental void-safe where only the knowledgeable and skilled would ever realise they were even there. Hyalhi imagined the threads of Amhrad's life, the psychic echoes of the Chapter Master wrapping around the scars the recent history of the Astral Knights had left on the substance of the warp. Hyalhi let those threads settle against his mind, winding them in and braiding them into the stuff of Amhrad's memories.

Flashes of those memories reached the surface of Hyalhi's mind – Amhrad battling Judicator Metzoi, arguing with the other Space Marine commanders on board the *Tempestus*, organising the chaotic aftermath of the spaceship's crash. Hyalhi even saw a fragment of Amhrad's confrontation with the former Chapter Master Derelhaan. Hyalhi had been there and he saw himself through Amhrad's eyes, leaping in front of Derelhaan before he could execute Amhrad first. In all the time he had done this, he had never got used to the feeling of another man's thoughts in his mind. It made him feel vulnerable. It made him feel human.

Down in the depths of Hyalhi's mind were the other memories he had snatched from the warp and locked away for safekeeping. Captain Sheherz, Chaplain Masayak, Captain Zahiros. The officers whose perspective would obviously be important. Brothers Kodelos and Ghazin, whose roles could so easily be forgotten. Sergeant Faraji, who had seen something so awful it could only be properly conveyed by seeing it through his eyes. All woven together from the threads of the warp into a tapestry of sensory information, filed away in the Chief Librarian's brain.

Hyalhi was barely finished when the first explosion shuddered the lightning rail. He ran to the end of the last carriage and leaned out to see. On the horizon, a good distance across the cityscape, a plume of dust and smoke erupted into the sky, throwing a rain of torn metal across the city. It looked like a great dark serpent striking up at the clouds.

It had worked. Hyalhi allowed himself a moment of relief. It was not over and this battle was not won, but the Astral Knights had done everything they could on Borsis and their duty was done. Hyalhi himself still had one duty to do, of course.

In the centre of the debris cloud rose a burning ember, a mote of fire ascending from the

darkness. It gathered matter and light into itself like a black hole pulling at the surface of Borsis. Hyalhi let the image of it burn into his brain, sinking in deep, because this would have to be remembered too.

The being that formed in the centre of the zone of destruction hovered above the tallest spire, and its body was composed of darkness. It had no fixed shape, its only definite feature the crescent of three eyes that burned in its heart. Tendrils of it, composed of torn and compacted metal, dragged it along above the spires. Hyalhi did not have to picture the geography of Borsis to know where it was headed.

What followed had to be remembered as well. Hyalhi turned his consciousness this time outside his body, riding the ripples growing in the warp from the impact of the being erupting from its prison. He could see Borsis unfolding beneath him, the endless steel canyons and metal spires rushing past. The Astral Knights had fought across much of the planet's surface but now he saw, from his high psychic vantage point, great palaces and monuments the Astral Knights had not seen. It was the work of endless millennia, the labour of countless scarabs and worker-constructs devoted to deifying their nobles.

The entity roared up ahead, shredding the spiretops as it passed and absorbing the fragments of matter that flew up into its swirling mass. Limbs formed and reformed as it hauled itself along, and pulses of raw, alien hatred battered against the surface of Hyalhi's mind. It was not a human emotion, for there was nothing human about this being, but it was unmistakably hatred.

The entity crossed into the Labyrinth Wastes. It passed over columns of warrior-constructs arriving to join the final stages of the battle, and those that could feel dismay felt it now as the great darkness bellowed and stormed overhead.

Smoke and flames licked up from the Cathedral of the Seven Moons. Parts of it were ablaze. A force of Astral Knights had made it inside and destroyed one of the defence gun batteries, blowing up the power coils and sending gauss fire flooding through the cathedral. But the damage, while appalling, had been barely noticeable against the scale of the building itself.

Outside the gates, hundreds of Astral Knights lay dead. They had engaged the bulk of Hyalhi's defenders in open battle, shattering great phalanxes of warrior-constructs and bringing down dozens of triarch stalkers and enthroned nobles. There the bodies lay thickest, among them the banner of the Ninth Company that lay across the charred body of Captain Khabyar and his command squad.

The final Astral Knights alive in the battle for the Cathedral of the Seven Moons were fighting inside the main gates where they had forced their way in. The guardians from the Temple of Heretics had pursued them and even as the darkness passed over the ruination of the battlefield the Astral Knights were firing off the last of their bolter shells. They fought back to back in the forest of statues and shrines dedicated to ancient necrontyr, their blood spattered across the faces of past overlords from a dozen necron dynasties. The temple guardians closed the last few steps and laid into them with their halberds, power fields shearing through armour. The Battle for the Cathedral of the Seven Moons was over.

Silver and gold glittered as Overlord Heqiroth and his lychguard retinue arrived on the battlements. The darkness bore over them as the moon that passed closest to it was torn apart and absorbed into its body. Heqiroth took one look at the approaching entity and the silvery necrodermis swarmed over his body in a protective shroud.

An arm of compacted debris swept the lychguard off the wall. They tumbled down the side of the cathedral along with tonnes of shattered battlement. The darkness loomed closer and the necrodermis squirmed off Heqiroth's body as if of its own accord, drawn off in ductile streamers into the swirling blackness.

The entity wove the necrodermis around it into the form of the star-god the necrons had first beseeched, then worshipped, then destroyed. Even this single shard of it was terrifying to see taking shape – it was like a deity of destruction and calamity from some long-forgotten human religion, crowned with three burning eyes, its enormous form clad in liquid metal.

Hyalhi did not know the necron language in which Heqiroth spoke to Yggra'nya the Worldmaker, the c'tan imprisoned in the heart of Borsis to power it and guide it towards Mars. It

was not a tongue that even needed sound, transmitted in pure information. But Hyalhi could guess it involved pleading, perhaps bargaining, Heqiroth offering lordship of Borsis, every necron under his command, everything he could possibly give in return for being permitted to continue existing.

And Hyalhi knew the reply, too. *You betrayed us*, Yggra'nya would be saying. *You imprisoned us. You enslaved us to this mad plan to journey to Mars.*

Heqiroth held up the tesseract in which he had imprisoned and then recaptured Turakhin, no doubt trying to persuade the c'tan that its enslavement had been Turakhin's doing. Yggra'nya snatched the tesseract and it dissolved in its hand, consumed by a purple-black fire, and with it the last glimmer of Turakhin's existence. But it was not enough.

You, Turakhin, all that came before, you are all the same. Hyalhi could almost hear the star-god's words and their meaning could not be in doubt. *The whole necron race is our enemy. Now I am free, and you will all be punished.*

It gave Hyalhi some measure of satisfaction to see Overlord Heqiroth lifted off the battlements and dissected, piece by piece, by the will of Yggra'nya. Each section peeled and lifted away, gradually reducing the overlord to a spindly metal skeleton that squirmed in pain, if necrons could feel it. That, too, was dissolved away until only a glimmering speck of consciousness sat in Yggra'nya's palm. Then the c'tan closed its fist and Heqiroth, too, was annihilated.

Yggra'nya raised its arms as if making a sacred pronouncement. The substance of the Cathedral of the Seven Moons came apart and reformed above it, an endless torrent of shattered metal forming great rings that orbited the star-god. Then they became gigantic blades that Yggra'nya stabbed into the surface of Borsis, driving them deep down through the crust of the world it had once built in an earlier age of the galaxy.

Yggra'nya dived into the fissure it had opened up. Hyalhi could feel it ripping through the planet, dissolving everything in front of it like a blowtorch through flesh. It tore through the vast power sources that drove Borsis, through the chambers where warrior-constructs were assembled and repaired, through the necropoli of long-forgotten dynasties and the vaults full of war machines and spacecraft. It shrieked through the core of the planet and looped around again, riddling Borsis with molten destruction in its rage.

The sky changed from a grey mantle of cloud to a patchwork of light and dark as the cover was blown away. Hyalhi knew what that meant. With the destruction of the generators and reactors at Borsis's core, the shielding around the planet was failing. Whereas before Borsis had been impervious to the torpedoes and lance batteries of the Varv Deliverance Fleet, now its surface was laid naked and open. Hyalhi realised he had been holding his breath, for now he breathed it out in relief.

The lightning rail continued to function until it reached the site of the *Tempestus's* wreck. The great scar in the cityscape still burned. The bodies of the Astral Knights thrown clear in the impact still lay among the rubble as Hyalhi picked his way carefully through the destruction towards the aft portion of the ship. He felt the ground shudder beneath his feet as Yggra'nya completed its murder of Borsis, and hoped he still had time.

The aft section of the *Tempestus* was badly mangled, but enough remained of the service decks for Hyalhi to make his way through towards the deck he needed. His wounds were catching up with him, as if with the Astral Knights mission complete he had given his body subconscious permission to break down. By the time he reached the banks of saviour pods, unused by the ship's crew and the Astral Knights, he was barely able to walk.

Each saviour pod could hold a dozen men, and was equipped to keep them alive for a month drifting in the void. Hyalhi did not need to be sustained that long. He did not need to be kept alive at all. What counted was the saviour pod's shielding, designed to protect the passengers from the sudden radiation blast of an imploding plasma reactor.

Hyalhi hauled the door open, feeling more muscle tearing inside his chest. He glanced up to see the sky through a breach in the hull. The clouds were being burned away, replaced with constellations very close to those seen from Varvenkast.

Yggra'nya hovered there, its three eyes turned down towards Hyalhi. There was no doubt the

star-god could see Hyalhi. He was the last Astral Knight left on Borsis. Perhaps Yggra'nya wanted to pay its respects, though Hyalhi doubted it.

Hyalhi looked up into those burning eyes. Men would have gone mad to see it, but Hyalhi was not afraid.

'We will find you!' yelled Hyalhi at the star-god. If it heard him, it gave no reply. It simply shot up into space, the silver streak of its body vanishing into the void.

Hyalhi clambered inside the saviour pod and hauled the heavy door closed. He slumped against the grav-couch and waited.

It did not take long. The saviour pod had no porthole through which Hyalhi could watch, but he felt it, shuddering through the *Tempestus* and showering the upper hull with avalanches of debris. The Varv Deliverance Fleet was quick about its work.

He heard the torpedoes boring deep into Borsis and the lance batteries raking at its surface. The Exterminatus, the ultimate sanction of planetary destruction, had always been the Inquisition's only logical response to the threat posed by Borsis. In this case it took the form of the cyclonic torpedoes fired into the tears opened up by the laser batteries, where they would form chain reactions of mass-annihilating detonations, rippling through the substance of the planet back and forth until continent-sized chunks of it were ripped free and the planet flew apart with the force of its own rotation.

Hyalhi had seen it simulated via holomat, and even at such a small scale it had been breathtaking. He had seen it himself, once, from high orbit over a world deemed by the Inquisition so irretrievably riddled with corruption that even the Astral Knights strike teams, who had assassinated the rebel leaders in control of the world, could not turn it back to the path of righteousness. Hyalhi had taken care to file away that memory along with all the others his Chapter had commanded he lock up for safekeeping. Now his mind was crowded with such fragments, his own and those of his battle-brothers.

Hyalhi did not need to survive. Only his head absolutely had to. As long as the brain could be salvaged, everything else was irrelevant. He took comfort in this as the waves of radiation hammered against the saviour pod and the *Tempestus* was ripped clear of Borsis's surface. His head was protected by the helmet of his power armour but his body let the radiation in through the tears opened up in the battle with Metzoi's elites. His organs blistered and shut down. His blood became poison. Even a Space Marine's constitution could only survive so much.

When his second heart shut down, Hyalhi closed his eyes, and remembered.



Addendum Personal

I gave Medicae Obscurum Kalliam Helvetar a quiet but dignified burial. She had been a part of my retinue for some time and she was respected by her colleagues. I am not one for ceremony. I gave no speech. We joined in prayer and watched her coffin sliding out of the station's airlock.

We destroy what is most important to us. We have few friends, and when they come along we must be ready to watch them die. We must be ready to order them to complete an autoseance sequence, even though we know full well their hearts will not survive another prolonged contact. Many men could give the order to destroy a world, but far fewer can fulfil what are truly an inquisitor's most testing duties.

The corpse of Chief Librarian Hyalhi has been packed ready for transport to Obsidia. Those Astral Knights who remain, an honour guard of trainees and veterans who number far too few for the Chapter to ever be rebuilt, will receive it as the sole relic of the Battle of Safehold and the destruction of Borsis. Hyalhi's was the only corpse recovered, and the wreck of the *Tempestus* itself is to be towed to a forge world and used in refitting existing battleships of similar marks. When the last of those battle-brothers on Obsidia dies, the Astral Knights will cease to exist.

With the burial of my medicae obscurum my duties in the Varv system are complete and I leave within the hour. My destination shall be the Conclave of Seraphan. The memories collected by Helvetar will form the core of the intelligence I shall present to my fellow inquisitors there, concerning the threat posed by Yggra'nya the Worldmaker. There are men among them better equipped with experience and manpower than I to pursue the star-god, and to destroy it if such a thing is possible. I find myself asking if I would have made the same decision as Amhrad to free Yggra'nya. I cannot be certain what I would have decided, but I do know that Borsis is destroyed and many worlds are saved. Aside from that, I can make no judgement.

One final thought before I set sail for Seraphan and close this journal again. Chief Librarian Hyalhi was the wisest of the Astral Knights, and on one matter concerning the c'tan I know he was correct.

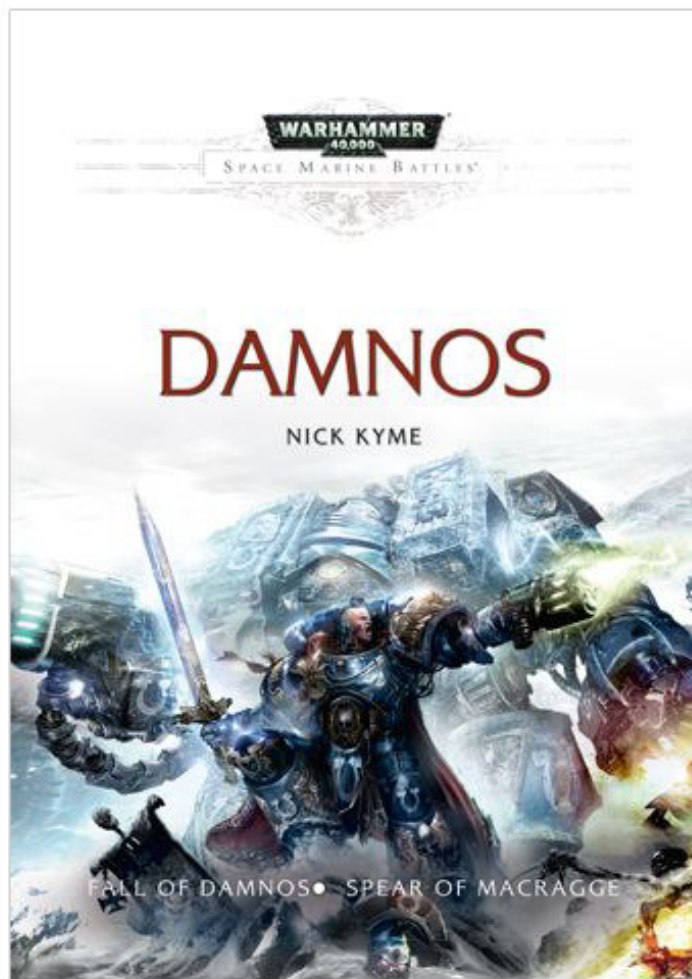
We will find Yggra'nya.

– Lord Inquisitor Quilven Rhaye

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